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June 9, 1896.

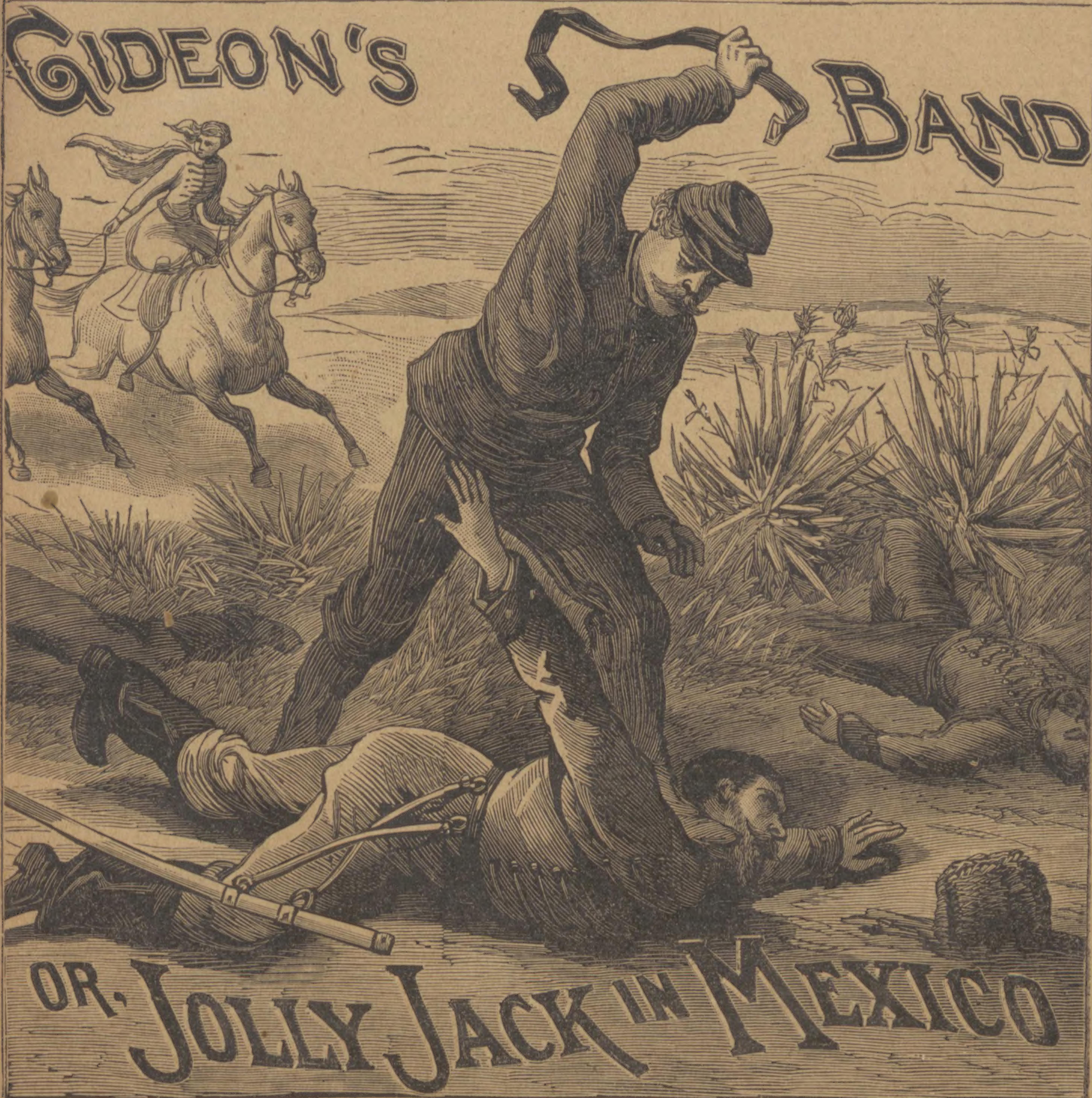
No. 985.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXVIII.



THE NEBRASKIAN BEAT THE TROOPER UNTIL THE LIFE SEEMED NEARLY GONE FROM HIS BRUISED BODY.

Gideon's Band;

OR,
JOLLY JACK IN MEXICO.

BY W. J. HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEBRASKIAN TAKES A HAND.

A man stood alone upon a little slope, not far from the City of Matamoras, looking southward, and at the same time nursing the light in the short brier-root pipe which was in his mouth. He wore a suit of faded blue, the remains of the uniform of a soldier of the United States.

The close of the war for the Union had found him upon the rich plains of Texas; but he had left these behind him, and wandering still further to the south, aimless in purpose, crossed the Rio Grande.

"E Pluribus Unum! Here, I am, all alone in my glory, nobody to molest me or make me afraid. It tickles me to death to think how some of these guerrillas would git fooled if they jumped on me now—it would, indeed! I'm the representative of the Great United States upon this furrin s'ile—not minister plenipotentiary, nor any other kind of minister, but all the same on a scout fer fun an' glory.

"Yas, fun an' glory. I'm bound to take a hand in this Dutch-French muss," he muttered. "Who wants me? That's the question! Who claims the services of yours in haste, Big Jack Ridley of Nebraska? Who 'hollers' first?"

At this moment he heard the sound of horses' feet, and looking down the road which led to the great river, he saw a woman on horseback, riding at full speed. Close behind her, urging their horses at their fleetest gait, came four men in the uniform of the French hussars. The woman, bending forward in the saddle, using her dagger to urge on the flying steed, was gaining upon the hussars, when a pistol-shot was heard, and the noble mustang which she rode faltered in his stride, as if struck by the bullet. Jack Ridley, with a peculiarly wicked gleam in his sharp eyes, rose from the stone upon which he had been seated.

She saw him.

"Help, señor!" she cried, in good English; "help for a woman in distress."

"Git behind me, señora," he said, quietly. "I'll take a hand in this circus! Easy, pard, easy!"—raising his hand to check the advance of the hussars. "I b'ile in here."

"En avant, camarades!" cried the sergeant who led the hussars. "Out of the way, canaille, out of the way!"

The fire in the eyes of the solitary man grew more bright, he thrust his hands under the loose pockets of his soldier blouse, and, suddenly, there was a cocked revolver in each!

The revolver, in the hands of a Western man, always commands a certain respect from those not accustomed to use it with precision.

The hussars did pause, and one or two of them put their hands to their holsters, but the glint in those dark-blue eyes warned them that it was hardly safe to draw a weapon.

"Kinder stiddy, pard! Don't draw a shooter, because I'm dre'dful nervous, and the sight of a pistol always makes me shoot; it does, indeed!" he declared.

"Monsieur," responded the sergeant, "I see that you are a soldier and a brave man. Do not, therefore, interfere with soldiers in the discharge of their duty."

"Frenchy," replied Ridley, "you do me proud. I'd like to parley-vous with you a long time, but not just now. When I see a gang of men firing at a woman, it jest makes my blood b'ile."

"Not at her, but at her horse," declared the Frenchman. "She is a spy of Juarez, and refused to halt when called upon. I should lose my grade if I went back to Matamoras without her."

"I'm mighty sorry, my friend," answered Ridley, "but under the circumstances I'll have to ask you to ride back and let her alone."

"You ask too much. This woman must go back to Matamoras with us. By Heaven, do you dare stand there alone and brave us?"

"Looks dreadful like it, pard; but I say this gal sha'n't be taken. Dig, my beauty; your

horse ain't much hurt. Put out as hard as you can, and while I kin shake a leg not a man of them shall follow you."

"Charge!" cried the sergeant. "Down with him first! No pistols; never shall it be said that four French sabers are not a match for a single man!"

"You will have it, then, you hounds!" cried Ridley. "Down you go, first of all!"

The revolver in his left hand hardly came to a level when there was a report; the French sergeant dropped upon the crupper of his horse and slid to the earth, shot through the left breast. Almost at the same moment the weapon in his right hand spoke, and the man who was nearest on the right uttered a yell of agony and also toppled from the saddle.

"Come and see me!" yelled Jack Ridley, and with a run and a bound he landed upon the back of the sergeant's horse. "Whoopee! Who's fur the great untamed catamount of Nebrasky? Who wants an introduce to the tall oak of the Western plains? You would, would you? Take that!"

Again the pistol cracked, and the third man, who was lugging a pistol out of his holster, fell without a groan. At the same moment another pistol sounded, and the horse which Ridley bestrode received the ball in his brain, and rearing, fell over backward.

Ridley, though a consummate horseman, was taken by surprise, and had no time to fully disengage himself before the horse fell, and his right foot was pinned to the earth in such a position that he could not free it.

He was at the mercy of the hussar, and the fellow knew it.

"Ah, miscreant, canaille!" the trooper screamed. "Wait! I shall kill you—murder you—to avenge my comrades you have slain."

Seeing that it was useless to try to free his foot, the Nebraskan drew his body as closely as possible to that of the horse, holding his revolver ready for a shot. But the Frenchman had no desire to try his skill at close quarters, and, to the surprise of the American he drew back out of range and dismounted, picketing his horse by driving his lariat-pin into the earth. Then he took something from behind the saddle, and when he turned he had a heavy carbine in his hand.

"Oh, you blamed parley-vous!" hissed Ridley. "Do you mean to take a cool shot at a man in my position?"

The Frenchman made no reply, but kneeling, not far from his horse, he took a long and steady aim. The first shot struck the body of the horse within six inches of the head of the doomed man.

"You cowardly hound! Come up to me like a man and give me a chance!" cried Jack. "I'd fight a regiment of such monkeys, once set me on my feet!"

But the Frenchman put in another cartridge and took steady aim again. This time there could be no mistake, for Ridley, clutching at the cloth upon his bosom, uttered a cry of agony and fell backward. The revolver which had done such good service fell from his grasp, and he lay upon his back, his pale face looking up to the summer sky.

The Frenchman threw down his carbine and ran to look at his fallen comrades, caring nothing for the man he had so treacherously slain.

CHAPTER II.

THE TABLES TURNED—A CLOSE CHASE.

The sergeant was not dead, but badly wounded, and he might recover. The second man was dead, for the bullet had pierced his brain, and the hussar ran to the third, who had fallen quite close to the American. This trooper had been shot through the shoulder, and lay groaning. The hussar stooped over him and began to examine his wound.

"How is it, Jean?" he asked. "Shall I leave you and pursue the girl?"

"No, no, Le Blanc; do not think of such a thing. Help me to bandage this wound, or I shall bleed to death," replied the man.

Le Blanc cut away the hussar jacket and shirt until the shoulder was laid bare, and using the skill which comes to soldiers after a long campaign, he stanchéd the flowing blood and bandaged the wound tightly.

"That will do," he said. "You may be sure of one thing, Jean; I paid the scoundrel for it."

"He is dead, then?" returned Jean, in a questioning tone.

"As Julius Caesar," was the reply.

"Ain't you a trifle out on that, pard?" inquired a quiet voice behind him. "If you don't find me the liveliest corpse you ever heard tell

of, then I'm a sucker. Take care! Throw up your hands!"

Close behind him, revolver ready, stood Jack Ridley. One of his feet was bootless, as if he had torn it from under the body of the horse by a mighty effort.

The teeth of the hussar chattered in his head, for he counted himself no better than a dead man.

"Now, Frenchy," said Ridley, "I ain't particular where I put the ball, so that you are satisfied. Where do you want me to plumb ye?"

"Mercy, monsieur, mercy!" pleaded the hussar, falling upon his knees.

"Marcy? Much marcy you showed me when I were pinned down by the horse. No, I give you the choice; where will you have it?"

"I only did my duty," screamed the hussar. "Do not murder me."

"That ain't my style," replied the American, in a tone of deep contempt. "Lay down on your face!"

The man obeyed, and Jack planted his foot upon his back and pinned him there.

"I ought to give it to you plumb through the gizzard, you consarned coward, but I reckon I won't, after all. But, one thing I will do, give you the durndest basting you ever had since your mother took you across her knee."

The belt of the wounded hussar lay upon the earth, where it had been thrown by Le Blanc. The Nebraskan caught it up and beat the trooper until the life seemed nearly gone from his bruised body.

"There!" cried the Nebraskan, throwing down the belt. "If that don't satisfy you then it ain't no use for me to try."

Binding the terror-stricken man hand and foot, the victor turned from one to the other of the hussars and satisfied himself that they could do no harm; then he saw the girl he had rescued advancing, mounted upon one of the hussar horses and leading another by the bridle.

"Mount, señor," she ordered, as she came up; "you have done that this day which will put a price upon your head if you are known. Come, and when Mexico is free, Juarez shall reward you, if my voice has any weight."

As Ridley caught the bridle and leaped into the saddle, after taking possession of a saber, carbine and waist-belt, he cast a long look at the girl. She was well worth a second glance, and the ex-soldier, an admirer of female beauty, gave a low whistle of delighted astonishment.

She was young, not more than twenty at the most, with a beautiful figure, which was set off to great advantage by her jaunty costume.

The hussar-jacket which covered her bust was buttoned closely at the chin, and a scarlet rebosa drooped gracefully over a short kilt of blue navy-cloth. Her lower limbs were covered by Turkish trowsers and her feet by dainty moccasins. About her waist was a red belt, but she had no weapons of any kind. Her hair, black as the raven's wing, fell in glistening waves over the scarlet rebosa. Her face, browned by exposure to the Southern suns, was perfection in every line. Her hands and feet were small, and, taken all in all, she was the most beautiful woman Jack Ridley had ever seen.

"If you have finished your inspection, and are quite satisfied with my personal appearance, let us ride on," she said smilingly.

"I'm satisfied," replied the American, "and you may bet on me every time. Lead the way, and I'll follow, even if you take me into the heart of Bazaine's army, you hear me!"

They rode on side by side, and for the first time in many years Jack Ridley was ashamed of his clothes. His had been a wandering and adventurous life, and had brought him little in contact with women. Marching, fighting, camped in the mud, taking in all the joys and sorrows of the soldier's life, with no real hatred of the men he had fought, he was ready to strike hands with them the moment they laid down their arms.

"What are you thinking of, señor?" she asked, with a rippling laugh.

"Why, señora," was his answer, "I was wishing just then that I didn't cut quite such a figure. This old coat has seen hard times, and been in many a fight, and is torn by bullet and singed by powder."

"Never mind the coat as long as you know that the heart of a brave soldier beats under it. I tell you, señor, that this, our war for independence, so far has seen no braver deed than this you have done, in assaulting single-handed four strong men, well-armed and mounted, in defense of a helpless woman."

"The Lord help the man that dares to raise his hand against you when Jack Ridley is 'round!" he said, quietly. "But, what is that? Seems to me I hear cavalry."

"This way!" cried the lady. "Ride hard, for the whole battalion is near!"

They turned their horses and broke through the cactus hedges which bordered the road. They were just in time, for scarcely were they out of sight when the head of a column of hussars appeared in sight, coming up from the direction of the Rio Grande. They were of the same regiment as the men who lay wounded in the road, scarcely two miles away, and were advancing at a swinging trot, their brilliant trappings shining in the sun, and keeping their line with the precision and skill for which the French soldier is remarkable. They swept by, and Jack Ridley gave a grunt of disapproval.

"Oh, you look pretty enough, durn ye," he growled, "but I'd like to see a great general lead a charge against you, and then we'd see how long you'd stand up, for all your pretty jackets and neat drill."

"Come away, señora! We have no time to lose, for when they find those fellows on the road they will be back after us," urged the lady, in low but earnest tones.

They rode hard, expecting every moment to hear the sound of cavalry in pursuit. At last, as they forced their horses to the crest of a hill, they saw, miles below, the hussars advancing at a gallop along the road which they had just passed over.

"Come on, you French dogs!" cried the girl, shaking her gloved hand at them. "We shall see how you will succeed in chasing Marietta del Reno upon her own land! Forward, señora! Give your horse the spur!"

"I ain't got any spur, but I reckon this will do," replied Ridley, as he applied the point of a Bowie to his horse's flank. "Away we go!"

They had been seen already, for one of the hussar officers, sweeping the horizon with a field glass, had caught sight of them upon the crest of the hill, and every horse was turned toward them, and the blast of a bugle, urging the cavalry to a gallop, came to them on the breeze.

"Whooppee!" cried Jack Ridley, as he dashed through the thickets. "This is like old times, señora. Oh, for forty of the boys of my regiment, mounted as I am, and how we'd make the fur fly from their handsome jackets!"

The ground over which they passed was broken and covered by low undergrowth, scattered bowlders and fallen logs, for they were heading through one of the rough ridges which corrugate this portion of Mexico, and which for years has been the haunt of robbers and refugees from the law. Here the hundred bandit chiefs whose names have become famous in Mexican history had their haunts, and all the power of the usurper, Maximilian, had not been able to drive them out. Now and then a few of them fell into the hands of the invaders, and they were sure to meet "short shrift and sudden cord," for there was little mercy shown by the Austrians and French, who composed Maximilian's forces.

The two fugitives came to a sort of savanna, stretching away for several miles. Beyond this was a sea of low trees, apparently boundless in extent. It was the chaparral.

Once hidden in its dim recesses, and knowing every path, they would be safe from pursuit; so they urged their horses hard. But scarcely had they crossed half the distance between them and the dense thickets which they sought, when the hussars appeared at the edge of the savanna.

At their head rode a man in a half-Indian costume, who was evidently acting as a guide. That he knew his duty well was evidenced by the fact that they had been able to gain so much upon the fugitives.

"I know that man," declared Marietta. "He is a Mexican who sells his country for Austrian gold—a trusted spy of Mejia! May the curse of the God of Liberty fall on his guilty head!"

"Let me get a pop at that Greaser and he won't lope any more," replied Jack, as he swung the carbine round and looked over his shoulder at the spy. They did not check their speed, for already the troop of hussars had separated and were riding hard upon both flanks and in the rear, to cut them off from the chaparral, the haven of refuge before them.

Who would reach it first?

CHAPTER III.

JACK RIDLEY'S DEVOTION—"SUDDEN CORD."

The situation was thrilling and interesting in the extreme.

The half-breed spy, knowing the country better than the girl, because in the course of a villainous life he had been forced to seek refuge in it often, had led the hussars by such paths that they bestrode horses far fresher than those of the fugitives. No wonder, then, that they gained rapidly.

"That is Manuel Garcia, the vile traitor!" hissed Marietta. "Oh, if he were dead, we might yet escape!"

"Wait, señora," responded Ridley, the words sliding through his teeth in a peculiar, hissing whisper; "I ain't done with him yet, bet your life!"

The hussars came up, leap over leap. Suddenly, apparently without purpose, the American wheeled his horse and looked at the hussars, while his carbine sprung to his shoulder. This sudden movement checked the advance of the middle column. The carbine for a moment seemed to hover over the person of the French captain, and then the direction was suddenly changed; the weapon cracked, and the half-breed toppled from his saddle, with a sharp cry of agony!

"Lucky it wasn't a rifle, durn ye," yelled Ridley, as he dashed away. "Forward, little 'un! Drive your horse for keeps, and don't mind me! Manuel Garcia won't lead 'em today."

Marietta had not realized that the American had halted, so sudden had been the movement on his part, and she had gained two hundred yards upon him before he again turned his horse in flight. The brave man saw that, while the halt had been fatal to him, it had saved her, for she was now close to the edge of the chaparral.

"On, on!" he shouted. "Never mind me; save yourself!"

She looked to the right and left, and saw at a glance that Ridley could not escape. It was hard to forsake this brave man, he who had periled his life to save hers, but her capture could be of no use to him, and she burst through a concealed path into the chaparral, where she was at once as completely lost to sight as if she had plunged into utter darkness. All the fury of the Frenchmen was turned upon the American, but that worthy, satisfied that Marietta had escaped, did not seem in the least disposed to fight or be frightened.

"You hold over me, pards," he said, quietly. "Now I'd like to know what you mean by coming tearing happy-go-lucky after a quiet citizen like me?"

"*Mille diables!*" shrieked the French captain, who well understood English. "Do you call yourself a quiet citizen, monsieur?"

"To be sart'ly I do, stranger! Quiet as a little lambkin at play upon the hillsides," replied Jack.

"Did you not shoot one of my men, just now?"

"Thought he wur a Greaser. Out in Nebraska, where I hail from, we don't make much count of Greasers, we don't," was the cool reply.

"Bind him, men!" commanded the captain. "We shall see how this 'peaceful citizen' will defend himself against the proof we can bring against him."

Ridley submitted to be bound without a word. He knew well by the fierce faces of his captors that he was condemned, and felt that he must die, and accepted his doom with utter fortitude.

"Dismount!" was the order of the cavalry leader, his mustachios bristling with rage as he looked at the prisoner. "Our orders are very strict, monsieur; we make short work of guerrillas."

"That's right," assented Ridley. "Them cusses have made us a great deal of trouble over thar in Texas. Hunt 'em out; we like the idee!"

"Do you claim to be an *American*?" demanded the captain. "I warn you that if you do, it will not serve you, since you are taken in arms upon our soil."

"Whose soil? This ain't France, as I knows on," replied Jack, bristling up.

"Yes; this is a part of the Mexican Empire, under the reign of Maximilian I."

"We don't recognize the critter. Our folks stick by the Mexican Republic, you see."

The Frenchman gnawed his thin lips, while a vicious look came into his scowling face.

"You are impudent, monsieur. First of all, do you deny that you had a fight with four French hussars on the road to Matamoras, killed one and wounded three?"

"The onus is on you, stranger; you make the statement and you've got to prove it."

"Perdition! Do you know that the horse you now ride belonged to Sergeant Gravelotte of my company?"

"You don't say! Waal, there didn't seem to be nobody wanted him, and I'd walked a good ways, so I thought I'd ride him awhile. I don't see no crime in *that*."

"You are very obtuse, monsieur. Very well, then; if you must have proof, bring forward Corporal Le Blanc."

A horse was pushed suddenly to the front, and, seated in the saddle, apparently supporting himself with difficulty, was the hussar whom the Yankee had thrashed so soundly upon the road to Matamoras.

"Oh, durn your Dutch hide!" cried the American, "I thought I'd licked you so that you you wouldn't want no more of it, anyhow. Gemini cracker! yes, pards, I know this skunk of misery, and I give him the durndest licking out hyar that man ever got. Mebbe he didn't tell you that I basted him with a leather belt until he yelled like a drunken Piute."

"Then you confess?" hissed the captain.

"Confess! Why, blame my cats and dogs. When I see four men arter a gal like *that*, shooting at her like she was a pirate, I'll be durned if I kin stand it. Yes, I did help her, and I ain't going to deny it. That's Jack Ridley's style!"

"That is enough, monsieur. You are a guerrilla, and in the pay of Ramon del Reno," declared the French captain.

"You lie, Frenchy! I hate to tell you so, but you lie like a thief," shouted Jack.

The captain raised his gauntleted hand and struck the speaker a stunning blow in the face. Jack staggered back under the force of the blow, and the blood started from his lips, but, with a sudden leap into the air, he planted both feet in the chest of the French captain with a force which drove the breath from his body and dashed him senseless to the earth.

"Take that, you cowardly whelp of a skunk—you libel on the honored name of Frenchman!" roared the Westerner. "Dog-gone you! How do you like that?"

Half a dozen men hurled themselves together upon the American, but he gave them some work before his feet were secured and linked together at the ankles. The blow which the Frenchman had received was a terrible one, and it was some moments before he recovered sufficiently to be able to sit up, and make a feeble effort to speak.

He cast a malevolent glance at Ridley, who was seated on the ground, as calm as a May morning.

"Tit for tat, Cap! You struck a bound prisoner in the face, a thing which only a *coward* would do, and he kicked back. You can't complain of that."

"Has any one got a rope?" demanded the French captain, in a faint voice.

"Manuel Garcia has a lariat," replied the orderly.

"Go and get it at once. *Mon ami*, which of these trees you see here do you prefer? I am going to hang you to one of them."

"Oh, I ain't no way particular, Cap," replied Ridley, looking at the trees which grew on the edge of the chaparral. "Any of them will bear me, I guess. I only ask one favor. I don't like hanging and would much prefer to be shot."

"I refuse! You shall die the death of a murderer, and the buzzards shall pick the flesh from your bones," was the savage reply.

"Oh, go ahead, you French pea-soup-eater," cried Ridley, in utter disgust. "It won't make no difference, as I knows on. Ye'r'a coward, and that's all there is of it!"

The orderly came back with a strong raw-hide lariat, which had been used as a lasso, and would have borne a dozen times the weight of the prisoner. Jack was at once dragged beneath one of the trees, the loop of the lasso passed about his neck, and the loose end thrown over a strong limb.

"Have you got anything to say before you go up?" demanded the captain, brutally.

"What should I have to say to men of *your* kind, Frenchy? I've lived a free, bold life, doing no harm to any *honest* man. I ain't afraid to die, and I'm glad to die for such a woman as I saved. Fool, coward, hound, I defy you! Do the worst you know!"

The Frenchman fairly danced with rage, but a look at the calm face of the prisoner showed that he could wring no word of fear from him. He made a signal, a dozen hands grasped the rope, and the body of Jack Ridley was struggling in the air.

CHAPTER IV.
THE TABLES TURNED, AND THE CHAPARRAL LAIR.

ALL seemed over for the gallant Jack Ridley. The French captain sprung into the saddle and rode around where he could look into the face of the strangling man, when a crash was heard in the bushes; a horse forced its way through the thick cover; then came the flash of a knife, and the body of Jack Ridley fell heavily to the earth, as the lariat was severed. It was Marietta del Reno who had come to the aid of the brave man who had saved her life!

"Captain St. Jean," she cried, "is it possible that you would committ murder?"

"You here, Marietta?" he ejaculated. "Have you dared to come back?"

"Yes! a thousand times, yes! I have come to surrender myself, upon condition that you spare the life of this brave American."

The Frenchman showed his white teeth in a savage smile.

"Ma petite," he said, "you have done a very foolish thing to come into the jaws of the lion. Seize her, men!"

"Let one of your villains lay a finger on my person if he dare," she replied. "I make you a fair offer; I will go with you to Matamoras upon condition that you spare this man."

"You are right, milady," responded St. Jean, with a repetition of his old malicious grin. "You shall go with me to Matamoras, and General Mejia shall pronounce your doom. Take her, men; she is a spy of Juarez!"

The orderly advanced and stretched out his hand to seize Marietta. She made no movement against him, but simply raised her hand. As she did so there came a shot from the edge of the chaparral, and the man fell dead.

St. Jean uttered a terrible cry, and looked in the direction from which the shot had come.

A thin line of smoke, slowly rising above the bushes, showed him where the rifleman lay concealed, and he discharged his pistol and called upon his men to charge into the chaparral. They obeyed, forgetting all about the prisoners, in the excitement of the moment. Victor St. Jean was the first to enter the chaparral, forcing his horse madly through the thick bushes, and tearing his flesh in the effort to reach the man who had fired the fatal shot; but the search was vain, and they came back into the opening, one by one, only to find that both Marietta del Reno and Jack Ridley had disappeared, taking with them the horse and arms of the slain orderly!

"I am disgraced forever!" hissed St. Jean. "After them, men! By all the gods, they shall not escape me! What fools we were to have left them here without a guard!"

"I thought the Yankee was senseless," responded the lieutenant, in a mortified tone, "but it seems he was only playing with us."

They rode wildly about the edge of the chaparral, looking for the tracks of the fugitives, then discovering an opening, or a seeming path, the whole troop entered and kept on at a rattling pace until they came to a beautiful opening, walled in on every side by the bristling growth, comprising perhaps twenty or thirty acres, where the grass formed a velvet carpet, and a beautiful spring bubbled up in the center. It was one of the old guerrilla camping-grounds, a wonderful place, in the midst of which were the remains of what evidently was one of the villages or so-called "lost cities of the Aztecs."

Here the command stopped in utter bewilderment.

The grass upon which the horses trod received the impression of their hoofs and sprung back to its place at once, leaving literally no trail, and all trace of the fugitives was lost. This was not all; for a number of paths diverged from the opening, entering the chaparral in many different directions.

"Pardon me, mon capitaine," suggested the lieutenant, "but does it not occur to you that we had better retreat?"

"Retreat, sir, and allow them to escape?" cried St. Jean.

"Mon Dieu! It seems to me that they have done that already, without any reference to us," responded the lieutenant.

"You may be in the right, Ducourt," replied the captain, "yet it nearly drives me mad to think that the villain who dared to strike me with his foot should escape the rope."

"We were at fault in charging into the chaparral, as we did," replied Ducourt. "Ha! By Heaven, there is the Yankee!"

He was right. At the opening of one of the paths which led into the chaparral upon the further side, was Jack Ridley, seated in his saddle, and looking at them fixedly.

A yell of rage came from the Frenchmen as

they at once charged, to be answered by a shout of derision from Jack as he turned his horse's head, and was off down the path, the infuriated hussars following at a mad gallop.

Victor St. Jean charged side by side with Ducourt across the broad opening. Two-thirds of the distance was passed over, when a yell broke the silence of the place—a yell full of vengeful significance. It was not the charging cry of the Mexicans, not the war-whoop of their Indian allies. No, it was a resounding Anglo-Saxon cheer, mingled with the short, sharp battle-cry of the men of the South! The astonished hussars recoiled, and then followed confusion in the ranks as an enemy for whom they had not looked came pouring out against them!

CHAPTER V.

"GIDEON'S BAND."

"If you belong to Gideon's Band—
We are hunting for a home."—*Old Song.*

FIFTY men, armed to the teeth, had charged suddenly from the chaparral and swept down upon the hussars with a force which nothing could withstand. At their head, swinging his saber with the ease of a veteran, his bridle hanging loose, guiding his horse with his knees as only the old cavalryman can, rode the brave Nebraskan!

And who were the men who followed?

Upon every hard, determined face, "old soldier" was written in characters which no man could mistake. They were men from the East, West, North and South, for from the moment the battle-flags were furled, the men of the North and South were brothers again. The tattered "grayback" rode shoulder to shoulder with the "Yank" from Massachusetts; the Texan ranger touched elbows with the "Wolverine." Of all ages, from the beardless boy to the grizzled veteran, they were soldiers, one and all.

Had the hussars been met by three times their number of Mexicans they would have charged boldly, without a thought of being defeated. But they knew the seasoned warriors who swung the saber before them, and felt that never before had they met such terrible enemies.

"Hack and hew!" roared Jack Ridley, as his saber cut the air. "Go it, you Johnnies! Cut and slash, you Missouri Pukes; lay on, you Yorkers!"

The hussars were separated as if a whirlwind had passed through, and a line of bleeding forms strewed the ground behind them.

"Wheel again, you sinners!" shouted Jack. "About, and at 'em again."

The hussars had formed now, and their first surprise over, met the shock bravely for a moment. But, what men, taken by surprise and utterly demoralized by a shock like this, could have stood up long against the charge of this desperate band. In the *melee* which followed, Jack Ridley and Victor St. Jean crossed blades.

"Now, you vile hound," screamed the Frenchman, "I have you, at last."

He was a finished swordsman, one of the best in the army of Bazaine. He intended, when they first crossed blades, to end the battle in three passes, but he reckoned without his host. The saber of Jack Ridley seemed charmed. Cut and thrust with all the skill he had, the Frenchman's blows were turned aside by the ready blade of the American, and, at last, by a dexterous blow, the saber was twisted from the grasp of the French captain, and he was at the mercy of the backwoodsman!

"Kill me!" cried St. Jean, folding his arms. "I no longer wish to live."

"Not any kill! I reckon I'll hev to give you a taste of the lariat first."

With a shrill cry St. Jean threw himself within the guard of the American and grappled him fiercely. Both came heavily to the earth, locked in a savage embrace. The captain was no mean foe, and, as the battle passed away from them, the two men lay upon the earth not far from the edge of the chaparral, contending fiercely for the mastery. Never before, in the course of a long and adventurous life, had the muscles of Jack Ridley been as sorely tried as now. The frame of St. Jean seemed formed of steel. Twice he nearly succeeded in turning his enemy and clutching him by the throat, and had he done so, all would have been over with the brave Westerner, for those iron fingers would never have loosed their grip.

The combatants rose to their knees, still closely locked, and rocked to and fro in the vain effort to get the best of it, when, suddenly, Jack Ridley loosened his right hand and dashed it with stunning force into the face of St. Jean.

Before he could recover from the effect of this blow, the Frenchman was lying flat on his back, and the loop of a lariat was about his arms.

"Kinder keerful, pard! Don't rare 'round that way, if you please. I'll say one thing fur ye, Cap; I ain't enjoyed sech a rastle in nigh onto ten years; by thunder, no!" drawled Jack.

The fight was over. Of the seventy odd men who had so gallantly followed the Frenchman through the day, but forty were on their feet, and these were prisoners. Fifteen had been killed outright, and the rest wounded, more or less seriously.

"That job's done," cried Jack. "Hooray for Gideon's Band!"

The chaparral resounded with their triumphant yells, and at the same moment a glittering band filed from one of the silvan paths. They were attired in the garb of the Mexican lancers, and with their broad-sashed trowsers, red-faced jackets and flashing helmets, they looked gallantly enough. At their head, by the side of a noble-looking man in the uniform of a Mexican colonel of cavalry, rode Marietta del Reno!

"Brace up, boys!" roared one of the Texans. "Greasers, by the shade of Davy Crockett!"

"Hold her easy, Dave," called out Jack Ridley. "These are friends!"

The colonel called his men to a halt and rode forward, accompanied only by Marietta.

"Señor," he said, "my daughter tells me that you have saved her from a fate which might have been worse than death. I am Colonel del Reno, of the lancers of Tamaulipas, and I have much influence in this State. All that influence shall be given to repay you for what you have done."

"Colonel, don't!" pleaded Jack, raising his hand in a deprecatory manner. "I can't stand compliment for doing a soldier's duty. Here we be—a troup made up of the boys from both armies—Rebs and Yanks—come together over the border and organized as a ranger band we've crossed the river, and here we are to do good service in runnin' these French and Austrians out of Mexico. This, colonel, is my troop, which we call Gideon's Band. I left the boys here in the chaparral while I went down to spy out the nakedness o' the land. I met your daughter, and that is how it all happened."

"And do you men really mean to join us in our battle against the usurper, Maximilian?" demanded Del Reno.

"You bet we're yours truly to the end!" answered Ridley.

"Then, señor, in the name of liberty, I offer you my hand and my authority. We two will fight side by side, and may God aid the right!"

"So mon't it be!" responded the American, raising his battered cap. "Now, the question is, colonel, what shall we do with our prisoners?"

"They are yours; do with them as you like," replied the Mexican commander.

"I only claim one of 'em, colonel, the captive of my bow and my spear, a cantankerous cuss that tried to hang me, and would 'a' done it if Dave Durkee hadn't b'iled in, along with your daughter, and put an end to a chap that was trying to grab her."

"It is Captain St. Jean you want. Well, I cannot blame you, and he certainly deserves no mercy from you. Do with him as you will."

"Thankee! I give you the rest of them, colonel, and I'll settle with my man."

He walked away, cut the bonds from St. Jean and raised him to his feet.

"Frenchy," he said, quietly, "'tain't but a little while ago when you had me as I have you now. Then you forgot that I was a man and soldier, and struck me in the face. Waal, I paid you for that, and I'm satisfied. Then you tried to hang me, after refusing to give me the death of a soldier. Now I ask you fair, what would you do with me if you hed me as I have you, hard and fast?"

"I would hang you to the first tree!" was the fierce reply of St. Jean.

"Korect! Then you don't expect anything else?"

"No; and I ask nothing else!" he returned.

"You wouldn't think I was doing any more than a fair thing by you?"

"No."

"I'll give you credit for one thing, Frenchy; you ain't got a drop of cowardly blood in your veins, and I like you all the better for that. Colonel, have you got a man you can implicitly trust—one that knows the chaparral perfectly, that you can lend me?"

"Certainly. Jose, place yourself at the orders of Señor Ridley," responded Del Reno.

One of the lancers rode out at the order.

"You understand English, Hosay?"

"Yes, señor," was the smiling reply.

"Then these ar' the orders. You will mount Captain St. Jean on one of the horses of his company and take him out of the chaparral. Go with him as far as you dare, till he can see his way clear to the Matamoras road. Then let him go, and join us. The colonel will tell you where he means to camp."

Jose spoke to the colonel in a low voice, while a member of Gideon's Band brought up one of the captured horses.

"I am at your service, Señor Captain," said the lancer.

There was a look of wild surprise upon the face of Victor St. Jean. That this guerrilla, as he considered the American to be, and whom he had so nearly destroyed, should show such mercy—such nobleness of soul, was utterly opposed to his notions of the character of the man.

"But," he said, "why treat me with leniency, Monsieur Ridley. It is your right to kill me; why not do it at once?"

"I have no wish to kill you," was the quiet reply. "No, Frenchy, I won't even keep you prisoner this time; so git!"

St. Jean mounted slowly, moving like one in a dream. He was naturally very proud, and it drove him nearly mad to think that he must owe his life to his enemy.

"By heaven, I will not do it!" he cried. "Kill me at once, but do not degrade me in this way."

"You are a queer duck, captain. What's the use of fooling? Go long, man, and let me alone. I won't have you at any price."

"I warn you that if we meet I will give you no mercy," hissed St. Jean.

"Thankee again! Same to you, Cap. Now don't bother me any more, but git as soon as you can!"

Jose led the way and the two rode out of the chaparral at a round pace, while Jack Ridley looked after them with a peculiar smile. He well knew that he should meet the hussar captain again.

CHAPTER VI.

A SABER'S WHIRL AND A SAD SURPRISE.

DEEP in the recesses of the chaparral, miles away from the place where the bussars went down before the charge of Gideon's Band, the combined force of Ramon del Reno and Jack Ridley had made their camp. The "boys" of the motley Band were delighted with their Mexican comrades, most of whom were gentlemen, who preferred to ride as private soldiers under the command of Ramon del Reno, who was a free lance, to taking a regular enlistment under Juarez.

The place the combined forces had chosen was a strange one, which, like the one where we first met the Mexican lancers, covered the remains of what is called Aztec architecture. The grass was green underfoot, but the irregular mounds which rose on every side showed where the work of other ages lay hidden.

"Look here, colonel," said Jack, "how long are we to lay here in lavender without doing anything? Three hull weeks wasted, and nary Frencher brought into camp."

"I have been waiting for the return of my daughter," responded the colonel, "and here she comes!"

As he spoke Marietta del Reno, admirably mounted, dashed into the camp. First she saluted her father, and then handed him a paper which he unfolded and passed to Jack. It was a captain's commission with power to serve as an "independent," under the general command of Juarez and to appoint his own officers.

"That makes me regular," remarked Jack, drawing a long breath. "I like to have a commission, and it seems more according to Hoyle."

"I will give you a chance to try your blade, captain," now added Marietta. "A force of ninety horsemen are conveying prisoners, one hundred in number, to Matamoras. We must cut them off and release the captives."

The bugle sounded the assembly and the men were quickly in the saddle. After a two hours' ride they reached the cover of a motte overlooking the Matamoras road.

Still sitting in saddle they listened, but could hear nothing of the coming troop.

"Are you sure that they are to come this way, Marietta?" asked the colonel.

"Yes; all in good time," replied the girl.

"Let me have the first whirl at them, colonel," cried Jack, eagerly. "There's a lovely ambush yonder, and I won't charge until they have passed."

He pointed to another patch of timber a

quarter of a mile away, close to the road down which the escort must pass.

"Go!" replied Reno. "I will look on while you strike a blow for the liberty of Mexico."

Gideon's Band eagerly followed their gallant leader, and were quickly hidden behind the motte. Scarcely was this done when a confused sound was heard just over the hill in front, and soon the head of a column appeared upon the crest. These were some of Mejia's men, a regiment which was hated by all who loved Mexico. Gideon's Band, seated like statues in the saddle, drew their sabers and waited for the order to charge. First came forty lancers, their brilliant uniforms reflecting the rays of the sun. Then the prisoners appeared, marching on foot, linked together two and two, and hurried forward by the lances of the men who marched on each side and in the rear. Blood dropped to the earth at every step, while the victims look savagely at their persecutors, who, in every case, replied by a jeering laugh and another touch of the lance.

As the rear guard passed the motte one of the lancers pricked the man in front of him with the lance, crying:

"Get on, beast!"

The man whom he insulted had in his veins the blood of the old Indian chiefs whom Cortez found it so hard to conquer. Wheeling quickly, he spat full in the face of the trooper who had insulted him. No sooner had he done so, when, with a furious cry of rage, the lancer thrust the bound man through the body, and he fell dead, dragging with him the prisoner who marched with him.

"Attention, Gideon's Band! Charge!" cried Ridley.

Up to the blue sky above them rolled a yell such as the startled Mexicans who were old enough to remember, had heard long ago, when Taylor and Scott bore down from Palo Alto and Vera Cruz to the very heart of the city of Montezuma. It was the clear Anglo-Saxon battle-cry, and Gideon's Band, with flashing sabers waving above their heads, came down upon the escort.

It was a terrible moment for them, for they saw only death in the eyes of the Yankee and Confederate band.

"Yah, Yah, Yah!" yelled the Southern men.

"Rah, Rah, Rah!" from the lips of the men of the North.

"Whoopie!" shouted Jack Ridley, as they came up to their enemies, who, in utter desperation, seeing the small numbers of the assailing force, faced about, leveled their lances, and prepared to meet the charge.

Jack Ridley had fixed his eyes upon the face of the man who had lanced the prisoner. From the moment he had given his horse the rein his blazing eyes never left the murderer, a burly native of Monterey. Perhaps the man saw his fate in Ridley's eyes, for, as the American came near, he launched a vicious thrust at his breast. But, scarcely had he done so, when the lance-head dropped to the earth, hewn off by the vigorous arm of the cavalryman. Then, with a sidelong bound, which brought him within the circle of the lances, the Nebraskan reached the side of the murderous wretch. Vain was the interposition of hand and arm to ward off the descending saber. At the first blow the arm dropped powerless, and at the second, cloven to the teeth, the man fell lifeless to the earth.

Gideon's Band were not far behind, and the glittering sabers quickly carved out a lane through the ranks of the enemy, who soon broke and fled down the road, closely followed by the Band, cutting them down at every stride. But their leader, a brave man, almost forced them to turn, and, with leveled lances they rode back upon the Americans, and for a moment checked their course.

"Whoopie!" sounded Ridley's slogan. "Give it to 'em, ye sinners! Charge, ye sons of Liberty; let 'em have the naked steel!"

The call was not unheeded, and the light-armed lancers were not matched evenly with these trained and hardy men. They began to turn for flight, when the troop of Ramon del Reno rode out in their rear, and they saw that all was over.

"I yield, Señor del Reno," cried the major in command. "Here is my sword!"

"Keep it, sir. It is a good blade, although you use it against the cause of liberty. Here, my men; take the handcuffs from yonder captives, and use them upon these prisoners."

The position was quickly reversed. The lancers found themselves stripped of their weapons, handcuffed, and marching two and two, while their late prisoners were mounted upon their

horses, lances in hand, ready to use them if required.

"You have done well, Captain Ridley," said the colonel. "How many of your men are gone?"

"We don't lose men fighting with toothpicks, colonel. Three or four of the boys are touched, but that is all you can say about it."

The work of securing the prisoners over, they prepared to march.

"Why does not Marietta come?" demanded the colonel, impatiently. "Here, orderly; ride down behind yonder motte and tell your lady that we are ready to march."

The man touched his hat and rode away quickly. He was gone but a moment, and came back to say that the Señora Marietta was not in sight. An angry cry came from the colonel.

"You have not looked well, fellow; I will go myself," and off he rode, followed by Ridley. They soon reached the place where Marietta had been left when the troop advanced; but to their utter surprise, the young lady was nowhere in sight!

"I do not understand this at all," said the colonel. "Where can she have gone?"

He called her aloud, but only the echoes answered him. It was plain that the girl was gone, but, why she had left the spot passed their comprehension. A look of doubt and fear showed upon each countenance, for both commanders realized that something had happened.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAIL-LIFTER AND AN UNLUCKY SHOT.

"SAY, colonel," cried Jack, "don't this go a little beyond your guess?"

"I cannot understand it; Marietta would not go away unless she gave me notice—you may be sure of that."

"Where did her horse stand when you deployed, colonel?"

"Just there; behind that mesquit' clump," he replied.

"Keep back, then! I'm an old scout and trailer. I'll soon read signs for you!" and the Nebraskan, leaping from the saddle, hurried to the spot where the girl had stood. For five minutes his eyes did not leave the earth, and he seemed to be reading it as men study a printed book. At last he raised his head.

"Colonel del Reno," he said, "I'm mighty sorry to say it, but the gal has been carried off!"

"Carried off? Under our very eyes?"

"Well, the chap that did the trick knew his little biz, you see. He didn't make his dart until you charged, and then, what with the rattle of sabers and the yells of my men and yours, the poor girl might have screamed for help and we'd never have heard her. Look here."

The place where Marietta had stood was bare of grass, in fact, a fine white sand, and showed the marks of feet readily. On both sides of the hoof-marks could be seen the footprints of two men, one wearing moccasins, and the other boots with spurs. There were traces of a struggle, which had ended in the horse being led away behind the motte.

"You can see for yourself, señor," said Ridley, after he had thus interpreted the sign. "Now, the question is, shall I up and follow? You can bet on Gideon's Band, every time!"

"Away with you! I trust you as I would myself in this enterprise," declared Del Reno.

Jack raised his fingers to his lips and blew a blast so shrill and clear that even the colonel started. As they heard the sound every member of the Band wheeled his horse and came down on a gallop.

"Boys," said Ridley, "some skunk of misery has taken Marietta del Reno prisoner. I want twenty men to follow me and try to git her back. Who'll go with me?"

Every man was ready!

"That won't do," protested Jack; and rapidly running over the names of twenty of his best men, he called them one by one. "That's all I want. The rest of you stay, and remember that if I go under, and I may, Dave Durkee is Captain of Gideon's Band. Where is Weasel Wilson? I want him to pick up this trail."

The man, Weasel, a small, wiry fellow about forty years of age, who had learned to trail in the Far West, at once leaped from the saddle and looked at the earth for a moment. Directly after he started off on a run, his eyes bent upon the ground, and followed the trail at such a pace that they were forced to put their horses at a trot in order to keep up with him.

Ridley waved his hand to Del Reno and started to follow, when he was joined by Jose Mancheta, the colonel's orderly.

"The colonel's orders," he said, quietly. "You

would not know where to go without a guide who knows the country."

The Weasel, running like a hound, with his nose to the earth, still held the trail. A few hundred yards behind the motte it led through a hollow, which was entirely out of sight of any one upon the swell above, and no doubt the villains who had taken Marietta had found refuge here, while watching the progress of the fight. At the lowest point of this gully the Weasel stopped for a moment before a small tree.

"Tied their horses here, Cap," he averred. "Then they crept out afoot, grabbed the gal, and put back."

"How many horses now, Weasel?"

"Three; I've got 'em down to a spot now, Cap, fur one of them has cast a shoe."

"Go ahead, then!"

"May as well ride," replied the Weasel, as he turned back. "Could foller this here trail with my eyes shut."

He sprung into the saddle, and led the advance at a rapid trot. Only a born trailer could have done it, but Weasel Wilson was one of those remarkable men who make such work a pastime. Not even the smallest sign, which to another man would have been invisible, escaped his searching glance. A bent twig, a leaf trodden into the earth, the bark touched by the passage of a hoof, a single horse-hair caught in the branch of a mesquit—all these things he saw and noted as signals to lead to the hiding-place; and Ridley, knowing the man so well, followed without the slightest hesitation.

"She gets fresher, Cap," the trail-lifter at length called out. "We are pulling in on 'em."

"Go slow, then, old scenter!" Jack ordered. "We don't want to scare them into doing any harm to the gal, for if they are Greasers they might do it. Kinder stiddy, pard! Don't be resky."

"Oh, let up, Cap," replied Weasel. "Teach your granny, but don't go to teach me how to lift a trail!"

"All right, my boy; only don't you make any mistake, now, or Jack Ridley won't call you pard!"

Which was warning enough to make Weasel as cautious as a weasel. There was method in the trailer's apparent rashness. He knew well that if the fugitives were overtaken, it must be before they reached the chaparral. For, once concealed in its dark depths, no man, no matter how skillful as a pathfinder, could get them out under twenty-four hours, by which time they could work their way through, and so reach the Matamoras road.

"Here, Jose," cried the captain, take Burt, Stanley, Jack Epps, Milt and Rowdy Pat, and make for the chaparral! Ride as if the devil kicked you, and get to it before them, if you can! Kill your horses if you must, but get there first! Of course they will make for the regular route, for they know that we are not there."

The men called out sprung away at the call, closely following on the track of Jose, who, like most Mexicans of the North, was a splendid rider, with a splendid horse. All those selected had been chosen by the captain for their known abilities as riders, as well as the quality of the steeds they bestrode.

The pace which the six riders kept up was simply terrible, and the country through which Jose took them might have taken the boldest horseman aback. For an hour they continued their breakneck rush, until, at last, coming down the slope at a full gallop, they reached the broad plain which lay in front of the great chaparral.

There was no sign of the kidnappers, and Jose drew a long breath.

"Give your horses a rest, comrades," he said. "Either they have passed already, or they are not here yet."

They crossed the savanna at an easy trot, closely following each other, and drew rein under the trees where Jack Ridley so nearly finished his life at the end of the lariat.

"Hold, boys!" cried Jack Epps. "Don't ride over the trail until I see whether they have passed."

He sprung from his saddle, hurried to the entrance to the chaparral and ran his eyes over the ground.

"All right, Hosay," he said; "they ain't gone by."

"Then they must pass this way," replied Jose, in a satisfied tone. "We must take cover here, for if we are seen it would turn them back into the jungle."

The party quickly buried themselves in the thick cover of the chaparral and picketed their horses, while they crept to the edge of the low woods and looked out. No one was in sight,

but, five minutes later, a solitary horseman showed himself upon the other side of the savanna, perhaps two miles away, although it did not seem so far upon that level plain. For a moment the figure stood motionless as a statue and then turned, and, making a signal, two other mounted persons appeared. One was a woman, for they could catch the flutter of her scarlet rebosa, and the other a man, who held the bridle of the lady's horse and urged him forward.

There was a grasping of weapons on the part of the concealed men, for they felt that those they sought were near at hand.

On the riders came, swiftly across the broad savanna, and heading for the welcome shelter of the chaparral. They could now be made out plainly, and Jose recognized his mistress, bound fast to her saddle, Captain Victor St. Jean and Manuel Garcia. They were coming on at a rushing trot, and the concealed men waited breathlessly for the moment when they could spring out upon their enemy.

Of the waiting six one man deserves notice—the one known as Rowdy Pat. He was a Killkenny man, a genuine son of the "sea-girt isle," a "broth of a boy," who had wandered from Erin in search of his fortune. Fun showed itself in every line of his jolly face and spoke in his voice. But he had acquired a reputation for bad luck, and but for his splendid horsemanship, Jack would not have sent him out with that "forlorn hope."

Some inscrutable Providence for which it is hard to account had sent Pat forth on that wild ride with only a carbine, and this weapon was in his hands as he lay in the shadow of the tangled trees.

Scarcely a mile separated the two villains and their captive from the chaparral.

At their advancing rate of speed, ten minutes would see them prisoners in the hands of the men of Gideon's Band.

"Ah, the skunk, the devil!" muttered Pat, as he brought the carbine to his shoulder. "Wait a bit, me honey, an' ye'll see Pat O'Brien bring ye down like a birrud."

Bang!

The weapon was suddenly discharged, and, as the smoke lifted, Manuel Garcia seized the bridle-rein of Marietta on the other side, and the three were off at a mad gallop across the broad plain.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAD RIDE AND A MAD ACT.

A FRIGHTFUL oath broke from the lips of the Irishman as he realized how much damage he had done by his unlucky shot.

"Och, may the devil fly away wid ye, Rowdy Pat, but ye've done it now!" he roared. "Up, ye devils; chase him, chase him!"

No need to urge. The men of Gideon's Band were already in the saddle, and speeding away at a breakneck pace across the broad prairie. But the advantage of a mile or more is a great deal to overcome, and it is no wonder that the distance did not seem to lessen. At first the hunted men turned at an angle to reach the chaparral, but it soon became evident that this would not work, and they drew away again and headed for an opening in the hills to the left.

"Ride hard, comrades!" hissed Jose. "If they get into the hills no man can tell what may happen. Manuel Garcia knows them like a fox that he is."

The six did ride hard, furiously, the grass seeming to bend beneath their horses' hoofs like waves, so rapidly did they fly over it.

But, no matter how swiftly they might urge their flying steeds, they did not gain much upon the fugitives. Foremost of all, mad with rage to think that he had been the cause of this unlucky event, rode Rowdy Pat. The only man who kept anywhere near him in the wild race was Jose, and these two finally began to close in rapidly upon their quarry.

"Hould on, ye French thafes!" roared Pat. "I'll fight ye both wid me bare hands. Watherloo, ye oumdabau; Watherloo!"

No Frenchman hears that word without deep rage in his heart, and St. Jean cast a glance of hate and rage over his shoulder at the Irishman, while the hand which was disengaged dropped to the heavy horsman's pistol in his left-hand holster.

Pat thought he was going to turn and fight, and uttered a whoop of delight, but St. Jean, without checking his speed, fired at the reckless rider as he would at a bottle. The cheek of the wild young son of Erin was laid open as by the stroke of a whip, and he reeled in his saddle;

but, steadying himself by a violent effort, he managed to keep his seat.

"Blaze away, ye hound," yelled Pat. "Take the ither one, fer sure ye can't load again."

But, St. Jean knew that this second pistol might be of use to him in a more desperate moment than this, for he saw that the pursuers were sure to close with him.

The Frenchmen flew through a narrow gorge, but close behind came the two gallant men, when the beat of hoofs sounded loudly in the gorge below them. Pat put his fingers to his lips and gave the signal whistle of Gideon's Band, and, to his delight, a short, prolonged reply was heard in front. St. Jean heard it, too, and knew that he was in a trap.

"This way, captain!" cried Manuel Garcia. "We have one chance yet!"

They turned up the slope on the right, urging their now panting horses at their best speed, but, scarcely had they gained a hundred rods toward the crest when there burst from the gorge below a shrill cry of rage as the men under Jack Ridley caught sight of them, and instantly turned their horses to breast the slope before them.

"We'll have you, Victor St. Jean!" shouted Ridley. "No mercy for you now; no mercy but the cord, you human wolf!"

"Don't mind him, master. On, on!" hissed Garcia. "We will soon be safe!"

When Jack Ridley and his men gained the crest of the plateau, they saw the enemy within easy pistol-shot, riding desperately, and urging Marietta's horse between them. Garcia's looks were fixed upon something not far ahead, and to the horror of Victor St. Jean he paused upon the brink of a huge fissure, full forty feet wide, and running down to an unknown depth.

"You dog!" he yelled. "I am in a trap, but at least I can kill you!"

"Fool!" responded Garcia. "Take her out of the saddle, and if we must die, at least do them all the harm you can. Swear that you will drop her in if they come near you. You comprehend?"

"Ha! ha!" shouted St. Jean. "You are right, Garcia. This may indeed drive them off if they value her life."

He cut the bonds which bound the girl to the saddle and sprung with her to the ground. Jack Ridley, now riding even ahead of Rowdy Pat, paused in horror as he saw the desperate man advance to the very brink of the chasm, still holding the girl in his arms.

"Come no nearer, you Yankee whelp, or by heaven you shall see me leap with her into this deep arroyo!" yelled the mad hussar.

The pursuing party halted, and the Yankee, with a sharp exclamation, pushed back Rowdy Pat, who was passing him again. He saw the resolution in the eyes of Victor St. Jean, and knew well that the desperate villain would keep his word.

"Back with you—further back!" cried St. Jean, "or, by all the saints, she is doomed. At least if I cannot have her, you shall not!"

Jack fell back to a distance of a hundred yards followed by his men. He saw that it was useless to parley with the madman, whose eyes now glowed like balls of fire.

Seeing them fall back, Garcia ran along the edge of the chasm for a little distance, and bending over the verge brought up a rope which was fastened to a stunted shrub just below the arroyo's rim. They saw him, bending backward and straining every muscle, tugging at something which hung there, and in a moment more a rude bridge, about two feet wide and formed by a single plank, rose slowly to the edge of the ravine.

Giving the end a swing to the right, it rested in a sort of notch which had been cut into the stone on the opposite wall. This notch held the plank firmly. Then he looped the end of the rope over a projecting point of rock and stepped upon the frail bridge, over which he ran quickly and called to his companion to follow.

Holding the silent form of Marietta tightly in his arms the French captain crossed the plank and safely reached the other side. The moment this was done Garcia cut the rope which held the bridge in its place upon the side next to them, and it fell.

"Adios, señores," sneered Garcia, with a mocking laugh. "My friend Jose will tell you that by making a circuit of about ten miles you can easily reach this place. By that means you will no doubt be able to learn that we are safe in Matamoras."

"And my honor will be regained the moment this girl is a prisoner in Mejia's care," shouted the captain. "I bid you a very good-day, gentlemen."

"Look yer' you French *parley vous*," shouted Jack Ridley, "you've got off this time, perhaps, but it don't follow that I won't cut your throat one of these days. You hear me!"

The only reply was a burst of laughter, as the two men, making the silent form of Marietta a shield to cover their bodies, slowly retreated and plunged into the depths of the dark pass beyond.

CHAPTER IX. ENTRAPPED.

A FEW days after that mad ride three men rode slowly along the road to Matamoras, near the spot where Jack Ridley met and overcame the French hussars. The one who seemed highest in rank in the party was of large frame, with a heavy black beard, dressed in complete Mexican attire and showing by his dress that he was one of the rich *caballeros* who hold great cattle ranges between Matamoras and Chihuahua. His long, black hair, falling quite to his shoulders, showed that he was of Indian blood, descended from the sons of Montezuma.

The second of the trio was slightly built and dressed as a *vaquero*.

The third was a padre, who ambled along upon a sleek-looking mule. There was an expression of jolly good nature upon the fat round face of the priest, and it was evident that he had not neglected the good things of this life.

"Can you not hasten the feet of that fat mule of yours, padre?" demanded the Don, impatiently.

"My son," replied the priest, in a smooth, oily voice, "hasten me not. If you have no further need of me, go in peace and leave me to pursue my way alone."

"No, no, good father," replied the Don, quickly. "We have need of you, and I promise that if you are faithful, a fat benefice you shall have upon my lands near Chihuahua. We will accommodate our pace to yours."

"*Gracias*, my son, *gracias*! Hot haste doth not beseem a son of the church, and my poor body can but ill bear the crosses of this weary life."

A peculiar grunting sound came from the lips of the *vaquero*, who had been looking at the priest in a peculiar manner, for some time. The Don turned sharply, and looked at his servant in an angry way.

"Be careful what you do, Juan, or by my patron saint you will wish yourself in purgatory. Mind him not, good father; he is an unconscionable dog, and well deserves the end of a lariat. Do what I may, I can never teach him proper respect for the church."

"It is sad, indeed, that such should be the case," declared the priest, turning his rubicund visage toward the *vaquero*. "My office is holy, my son; respect the sacred vessel."

Juan made no reply, but his face expressed the most profound contempt.

"I shall remember this, sulky dog," said the Don, furiously. "Favored servant as you have ever been, I will not permit disrespect to the holy father. Say but the word, padre, and I will punish him upon the spot."

"Not so, worthy Don, not so! Grace will some day touch his stubborn heart, and he will repent. Trouble him not, I pray you, but your zeal shall not be forgotten."

The city of Matamoras lay before them, and they rode on steadily. As they passed the barrier a squadron of lancers rode out, glittering in their gaudy trappings, and at their head, wearing the uniform of a major, rode Victor St. Jean. He looked sharply at the party and called a halt, but he saw something in the face of the haughty Don which made him pause.

"Who are you, señor?" he demanded. "As an officer under the Empire, I have the right to ask."

"I am Ignacio Vanero, a gentleman of the city of Chihuahua, and am here with information which will be useful to the cause of the Empire."

"A friend of Maximilian I.?"

"I am. Give me a guide who will conduct me to the commanding general."

Le Blanc, who had now risen to the grade of a sergeant, was detailed to conduct the travelers to headquarters, and after some time they were led into the presence of the French marshal and the Indian general, Mejia, when Don Ignacio at once declared that he could guide them to the haunts of Ramon del Reno and Captain Ridley, and rescue the prisoners they had lately taken.

Mejia looked at the informer with a scowling brow. The Indian had little faith in a traitor, and, although they might use him to advantage, he had strong suspicions of him.

"Why do you make this revelation, señor?" he demanded.

"Why do you serve Maximilian—you, who are a Mexican?" asked Don Ignacio, curtly.

"He has you there, general!" said Bazaine, laughing. "The only question is—shall we make use of this information?"

"Certainly, if what he tells us is worthy of belief. Where say you these men are concealed, Don Ignacio?"

"In the great chaparral, not far from the Lost City."

"Are they under strong guard?"

"Scarcely fifty men, now. The rest are away upon a foray."

"Marechal," cried Mejia, starting up suddenly, "I will do this work myself. I am tired of lying idle here, and it will do me good to strike a blow with my own hand. Who leads this party who guard the prisoners?"

"You will find the American there," was the reply.

"Enough! Orderly!"

The sergeant came in quickly and saluted.

"A hundred and fifty lancers, under command of Colonel Rivera," cried the general. "Let them report in half an hour. You go with us, of course, Don Ignacio?"

"Why not? Without my help you can never trap them," was the answer.

The party were soon upon the way, Don Ignacio riding by the side of the general, and the troop following. The priest who was evidently bewildered by the expedition, and did not know why it was taken, was left at Matamoras, while the *vaquero* accompanied his master, riding in the rear of the line.

Three hours later the troop broke through the chaparral into the beautiful glade in which the hussars and Gideon's Band had met. The evidences of that fight were yet visible everywhere, and Mejia cast an angry look about him.

"Ha, Rivera; this is the place where these cursed Americanos and the hussars met," he said.

"It is true," replied the colonel. "If we may credit Major St. Jean, it was a hard battle. But, how is this, Don Ignacio? I thought this was the place where we were to find the prisoners?"

"You are right, colonel; this is the place! Give me a brace of pistols, for I may need them."

"But I see no one here!"

"Because you do not understand the mysteries of this place as I do. Dismount, gentlemen, and take your weapons."

The men sprung from their saddles, and with their pistols in their hands, advanced cautiously among a succession of curious-looking mounds, overgrown by low bushes. At last they reached a place, where, protruding from the earth, they saw what appeared to be the corner of a ruined wall.

"Seniors," declared Don Ignacio, "respect to fallen grandeur; I demand it. For, general, under these mounds lies the city of the dead, built by the hands of the race from which we sprung."

"Ha—the Lost City!"

"Yes, the Sacred City! By Heaven, if these men had not dared to desecrate this place, I would not have betrayed them. Even now, no one save you and I must know how to enter here. Order the men and officers to face about and not dare to turn their heads. My man may come, for he knows the secret."

Juan came forward hastily, and the troops of Mejia, at his order, faced the other way. They knew their grim chief too well to disobey him, and stood in deep expectation, listening to the faint clicking sound which came to their ears.

Rivera, although he dared not look, had his ears open.

"Keep an eye on your men, général," warned the Mexican. "For my life I would not have them learn this secret!"

"They shall not turn," replied the general. "Let one of them move, and he is no better than a dead man."

The tapping continued; then came a low rumbling sound, and a slight shock. It was followed by an angry cry, and Rivera, regardless of consequences turned to look. But, to his utter horror and surprise, only the ruined wall was there! Don Ignacio, Juan, and General Mejia were gone—where, no man could tell!

CHAPTER X.

TEXAS DAN "ON HIS MUSCLE"—JACK ON DECK.

"Now by all the saints," cried Rivera, "it is a trap! Turn, my men, turn! These dogs have betrayed our general!"

As the men faced about and saw how suddenly and completely the party had disappeared, the more devout and superstitious among them crossed themselves, and muttered an "ave" hastily.

"Tis the work of the devil, my colonel," said one. "How else could our general have disappeared so completely?"

"Be silent, fool!" replied Rivera, gloomily. "There is some way to enter this cursed place, if we only knew it. Has any man among you ever heard of this buried city?"

"The Indians know all about it," replied one of the lancers; "but, *carajo!* Do you suppose one of them would tell, if grilled on a hot gridiron? There is such a city here; that I know, right well."

"Then we must break in!" cried Rivera. "An ax here!"

One of the lancers advanced, carrying in his hand a heavy, short-handled ax, with a broad curved blade, sounding like the battle-ax of the old knightly days.

"Try this wall for me," commanded Rivera.

The man turned the ax in his hand and struck three times with its back, with all his force, but the old masonry did not start in the least. The men looked incredulous, for not one of them could see how three men could have passed in a moment through a solid stone wall! The man struck again and again, but no answering echo showed that there was any hollow space behind or beneath the stones.

"This is wonderful, wonderful!" ejaculated Rivera. "They were here, and but a moment since, for we all heard their voices. Now, where are they?"

A shudder passed through the ranks of the superstitious lancers. Evidently the mystery of the place began to awe them, and they looked from face to face in manifest alarm. Even Rivera, who was a good officer and man of education, began to doubt whether this was earthly work.

"We must solve this mystery," he cried. "Take your chaparral axes, men, and cut down yonder small tree. We will try a battering-ram upon this wall."

The tree was quickly down and stripped of its branches. Fifty men lifted it, and, gathering impetus as they approached the wall, dashed it against the solid masonry with tremendous force. The recoil nearly upset the whole party, but the wall stood firm as adamant!

"Again, my lads!" shouted Rivera. "No wall can stand that long."

The men drew back for another blow, when a shout from an officer drew the attention of the colonel to the front. The head of a column was seen emerging from the chaparral, and the jingle of spurs and sabers was heard. Rivera had never before seen those men, and their appearance took him by surprise, for it was Gideon's Bard in their new uniform, which they had just received—a complete suit of black, slouched sombreros, with a silver buckle on the side, red waist-belts, and heavy boots. On each side swung a heavy navy revolver, and their gleaming sabers were in their hands, and carbines slung at their backs.

"Greaser, boys!" cried Texas Dan, as he saw the lancers. "Hoopee! Sock it to 'em, pard!"

A wild yell, which sounded like the knell of doom in the ears of the astonished lancers, broke the silence of the Lost City, and Gideon's Bard came dashing down in splendid style. The mere boldness with which they attacked three times their number of well-appointed men was enough to strike terror to the Mexican, who had heard of these dreaded Americans before. They had met them upon the Texan plains, in New Mexico and California, and looked upon the native American as a born fighter, against whom no Mexican could stand. Half of the lancers had not mounted, and those who were in the saddle did not wait for them. Away they went, dashing through the chaparral, and thinking of nothing save of escape.

A wild cry of rage burst from Rivera as he saw his men begin to turn, and urging on his horse, he struck one of the flying lancers to the earth, and called to the rest to turn back.

"Turn, you dogs, turn!" cried the officers, seconding their colonel. "Bear them back on the points of your lances."

Their determined bearing had its effect, and a hundred men faced about, leveled their lances, and met the charge of Gideon's Bard.

"Look out for the prods," roared Texas Dan. "Revolvers, boys! Give 'em pills by the boxful!"

Dropping their sabers, the men of the Band seized their "navies," and began to pour a close

fire into the crowded ranks of the lancers, while their horses never swerved in their stride. Again the Mexican ranks began to waver, and Gideon's Band, then dashing aside the lances with their revolvers, broke through the guard like a whirlwind, strewing the earth with the killed or dismounted enemy.

"Wheel about and turn about and do just so!" yelled Texas Dan, turning his horse by the touch of his knees. "Once more, my beauties; give 'em Hail Columbia, Yankee Doodle and all the rest of it. Hooray for Dixie!"

Again they charged back, this time with their sabers swinging in the air. Not a man among them but had been in the cavalry service, and no wonder that the lancers, after one taste of their quality, again melted away before them. The men of the Band now began breaking away in pursuit of the scattered foe, when the shrill whistle of Dan called them back.

"There's a time to fight an' thar's a time to run, boys. Let's run, fur a change!" he shouted.

It was time they did, for through the trees the brilliant uniforms of the hussars could be seen, and in overpowering force.

So, turning, with a jolly cheer, the men of Gideon's Band followed their leader, while close behind them thundered the French hussars, headed by Major St. Jean, his eyes blazing with fury. He thought to catch Jack Ridley at the head of his men, and even now supposed him there, unless he had gone down in the struggle with the lancers.

Away the Americans went through the low arches of the chaparral, the hussars close upon the dark-robed troop.

"On, on, mes camarades!" screamed St. Jean, terribly excited. "Run them to earth and give no quarter. Death to every dog!"

A resounding cheer from Gideon's Band was the only answer, as they kept the horses at their speed. Although they fled, they could hardly be said to fly from fear. Texas Dan knew well that the lancers could not be very hot in the pursuit, and his aim was to draw the hussars far enough away so that he could have them to himself.

But, in the midst of their career, a bugle-blast was heard in front, and instantly the bugles of the hussars sounded the recall, for Victor St. Jean knew right well that Ramon del Reno was not far away, for the hussar had often heard that bugle!

"Halte la!" he cried. "Wheel into sections; march!"

The moment they turned, Texas Dan was again upon their flanks, and the carbines began to play upon the retreating hussars. St. Jean, furious at this attack, would have turned again to brush away his assailants, but the sounds in the rear warned him that a new force was coming.

Selecting thirty of his best men, he took the rear guard and charged again and again, until they reached the opening where the broken lancers were slowly forming. At least fifty of them had the mark of Gideon's Band upon them, and the rest were only too willing to retreat.

"We must go," groaned Rivera, in a tone of savage anger. "By heaven, St. Jean, do you know that the general has been betrayed?"

"Mejia?"
"Yes."
A grim smile passed over the face of St. Jean. He had not forgotten that Mejia had refused to believe him when he had been beaten by Gideon's Band, and had disgraced him and deprived him of his command until he had proved that his statement was true by the capture of Marietta.

He was not very sorry, therefore, to hear that Mejia had fallen into a trap in the same place where he had himself come to grief.

"Be that as it may," he cried, "we must not dally here, for Ramon del Reno is coming up with all his men, and these cussed Yaukees are close upon us. Ho, there! Let Garcia lead the way, for no one knows these passes half so well as he."

Rivera well understood that it would not do to stay; so the command marched away, taking one of the numerous passes which debouched into the opening, where the ruined city stood. Scarcely were they out of sight when the rocky wall through which the general and his two companions had disappeared began to shake, and the next moment a square stone slipped aside, leaving a passage large enough to admit the body of a man standing nearly upright.

In this opening appeared the commanding figure of Don Ignacio.

He stood silently there, looking across the

field of battle. A gleam of peculiar meaning passed over his bearded face, and he noted the position of every object with one sweeping glance. Then, hearing the sound of coming hoofs, he stepped back hastily.

"Not yet," he muttered. "The time has not come."

The stone slid into its place with a grating sound as Gideon's Band charged across the opening. They came to a halt upon their field of battle and dismounted. During the last half-hour they had been joined by Jose, who was now standing by the side of Texas Dan.

"That was a good idea of yours, Jose," said Don, laughing. "How the skunks turned tail when they heard your bugle!"

"I thought it would do no harm to sound a charge," replied Jose, smiling. "I did not know but you were hard pressed."

"Oh, not so very. Gideon's Band could lick St. Jean and his gang, but that would be wigs on the turf in trying to do it, and the boys are good ones and I don't want one of them to go under. Say, where is the cunnel?"

"He is on a hot scent after young Colonel Mejia. He thinks that if he can catch him he might be able to change him for my mistress."

"Um! I wonder whar poor Jack is now?" said Dan. "I'd give a small fraction of filthy lucre to see the old chap again."

"Hello, Dan," came a quiet voice. "So you wanted to see me, old boy?"

Jack Ridley stood before them with a quizzical look upon his face.

CHAPTER XI.

DOFFING HIS MASK.

WHEN the Indian general stood before the wall of rock with Don Ignacio and his servant, it suddenly slipped aside and he was hurled forward and fell nearly upon his head into the opening thus made. He was half-stunned by the fall, and, before he could recover, was seized upon either side, dragged forward along a rocky floor and thrown down with some violence. His weapons were taken from him and he heard a sharp voice say:

"Get a lamp, captain! Let's take a look at this beauty."

"Tie him first," replied the other, "and then come with me."

He was bound hand and foot and heard retreating footsteps. Half an hour passed: then the steps were heard again, and two men came forward, one carrying a lamp in his hand and the other a heavy navy revolver.

The two were Jack Ridley and the Weasel, and they stood looking at him in silence.

"Who are you?" cried Mejia, in a stern voice. "Release me at once, you scoundrels!"

"Oh no, general," replied Jack Ridley. "Don't rile my bile by speaking in that kind of way; you don't know who you are talking to."

"A cussed American; that I know."

"A mistake, general. You are speaking to Don Ignacio Vanero, from the neighborhood of Chihuahua; a man that hates Colonel Del Reno like pizen, you know. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You Don Ignacio!" cried Mejia. "It is false! He was a Mexican, I am sure, and you are an ignorant backwoodsman from the States."

"Oh no; I'm the identical cuss who went to Matamoras, just a-purpose to take you into camp. I've done a heap of trading over the Santa Fé trail, and I can sputter the Greaser lingo like a native. And as for the Weasel, he's a half-Greaser, anyhow. Ever heard tell of Gideon's Band—a lot of the boys that come over from Texas to see the fun? I'm one of them; I'm the captain of that band."

"I have heard of you. Is not your name Ridley?"

"You bet! I'm that very General Jackson!"

"You are a bold man to dare go into Matamoras in that disguise."

"Well, general, you see we are natural odd fellows, anyhow. Four years we tramped up and down, fighting, camping, licking the Southern boys and getting licked ourselves, just as the luck went, but finally they sort o' caved and quit. But there was some of us too full of fight yet to subside, so we cavorted over the border and took a hand in this leetle skirmish."

"Did it ever occur to you that you had taken the wrong side, sir?" demanded Mejia.

"Well, when I come over, I didn't care much which side I took, so there was fun, but when I see a gang of Farley Vouls following a woman, with their bosses on a dead jump, shooting at her, by thunder, I just piled in on her side."

And there I stick, like a hornet to an apple-core."

"Perhaps I could make it worth your while—"

"Now, general, don't! I've listed and took a commission from Juarez, and there ain't no back-down in me; not a cent's worth. Do you know what I want of you?"

"You want a ransom, I suppose," was the sullen reply.

"Yaas, I want a ransom, but not in money. You've got a prisoner that we'll change you fur, you see. Not taet I think Juarez would like to trade that way; but we'll do it without asking his leave. We want Marietta del Reno back, and will have her, or by the jumping Bourbon, I'll string you up higher than Haman!"

"Ha! was it for this you took me prisoner?" demanded Mejia. "Bahl! That spy shall die, unless she bends to my will! That I have sworn."

"Jess so; that's our little game, general; that's the way we figger it. If you write an order to let that girl loose, on the day we see her here in safety we'll let you run. What do you say to that?"

"I say that you may kill me first."

"Is that so? Now, I sorter gave you credit for more sense, general. But it don't matter; we can do the trick without any help from you."

"In what way?"

"Kinder this way: I send a man down to Matamoras and see Bazaine, that high and mighty Frenchman. My man says to him, 'We've got the general in a tight place, and if the señora is not free and with us in such a time, we plant his body in some convenient spot, after it has hung a suitable time from the limb of a high tree.'"

"Would you murder a prisoner?"

"No; I couldn't do it, but there's plenty in this yer' chaparral would just hop up and down for the chance. You a n't been very easy on them, you know. Hi, Weasel; what's up?"

"Come and see the fun," replied the Weasel. "The boys are at 'em."

The two ran out of the passage together, and peeping through a crevice, saw Gideon's Band tear through and through the lancers and scatter them like chaff.

"Hurrah!" cried Jack. "Bully for old Texas! Did you see Dan raise that Greaser out of the saddle? Oh, for a horse and saber, and if I wouldn't take a hand, I am a ghost. At 'em again, Dan! Run 'em down! Chaw 'em up! Yah—whoop!"

Toey saw the men of Gideon's Band suddenly dash into the chaparral, with St. Jean upon their haunches. Then there was silence and the two men drew back to the place where their prisoner lay.

"My boys have been kinder brushing the jackets of your lancers out there, general," said Ridley. "If I had such a gang under me as them Frenchers, I'd sell 'em fer stable-boys, by George. They are a tough crowd, Gideon's Band, and the way they made the feathers fly!"

"Has there been a fight?" demanded the general, eagerly.

"Waal, you couldn't call it a fight, because the gay lancers couldn't stand up to the rack and eat cold steel and lead. Now, in a little while, we expect Conejos and his men along this way. Would you like to see Conejos, general?"

Mejia felt a shudder pass through his iron frame as this man's name was spoken. He knew that the guerrilla had sworn to have his life by torture. For, of all the cruel men who had oppressed the patriots of Juarez, none was so well known to the restless dwellers of the chaparral as this general, and he well comprehended what his fate would be in case he fell into the clutches of his relentless foe, Conejos the guerrilla.

"Waal, general," demanded the Westerner, with his inimitable drawl, "what d'ye say—he?" Shall we have the gal?"

"Look you, my man," declared Mejia, setting his teeth hard; "if I do accept your terms, and you ever fall into my hands, may all the saints have mercy on you, for I will have none!"

"I won't rise to return thanks, mister," responded Jack. "Let that kind of threat go for what it will fetch among squaws. I've got you and it were a neat thing, if I do say it, and in consequence you are awfully mad. Hi, Weasel; jump out there and look around."

The Weasel obeyed, and looking out of the opening, saw the lancers and hussars coming back at a gallop, and quickly disappear in the woods. Then came Gideon's Band, riding at

the free swing of their horses, but not hurrying themselves in the least. Captain Jack, leaving his prisoner bound and helpless, stepped out of the opening by the sliding stone and suddenly stood before Texas Dan, who looked at him as one risen from the grave.

"Jack Ridley, by the horned alligator of the Massassippi!" roared Dan. "I resign, old boy—you hear me!"

"Dan," said Ridley, as he crossed palms with the redoubtable Texan, "when you was making hide, hoof and taller fly among them Greasers—Captain Jack was watching ye! Didn't I pray for a horse and saber then? Oh, no—I guess not!"

The men crowded about their idolized leader and greeted him warmly. "Yank" or "Reb," it was all the same; their joy in meeting Jack Ridley safe, was expressed in the same vociferous manner.

"Boys," the captain returned, "you do me proud! And the man that says our fellows will ever lift a hand ag'in' one another while the earth stands, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But, I ain't got time to fool. Where's the cunnel?"

"Oh, Jose has just come in from his force. He's up here toward Chincha with two hundred men, waiting for a rake at a wagon-train, and he sent Hosay in to say that he wanted us."

"Then, away you go, boys. I won't keep you from work."

"Ain't you going with us, Cap?"

"No, Dan; no. I said I wouldn't come 'n until I got Marietta out of the grip of the Greaser general, and I meant it! Say, Dan, when I come back I'll tell you a yarn worth hearing. Why, blame all my cats, if I ain't got Mejia down there in the ruins, tied neck and heels, I'm a Dutchman. And I'm going to trade him for Marietta!"

"Good! glorious! old boy. Shall I leave any men with you?"

"Leave Hosay; I want him."

"Where will we find you?"

"You come to the old battle-ground, on the Jalapa road, at early morning, two days from this, and we'll be there."

"Enough said! Come as soon as you can, Cap. I don't take no pride in Gideon's Band while you are away."

The wild horsemen, with thundering cheers, turned their horses and rode out of the chaparral, leaving Jose and Jack Ridley together.

"Come with me, Hosay," ordered Jack. "I want to show you my bird."

They entered the secret passage which led to the subterranean ruins of the old Aztec temple, where they found the Weasel sitting near the prisoner, and annoying him by insulting questions.

"Dry up, Weasel!" cried Ridley. "The Greaser in you will crop out when you git a man under your thumb. Here; take off those straps. I reckon the general will know better than to rare up when he ain't got a weepin."

"Right, sir," replied the general. "Mejia knows when he is beaten. Ha, Jose; has your master sent you to exult over me?"

"No, general; my master knows nothing of this. It is entirely the work of this gallant man."

"I shall know how to reward it, in the time to come," hissed Mejia. "But, we waste time. If you will give me writing material, you shall have an order for the release of the woman."

Jack took out an old diary, tore out a leaf and presented it, with the pencil, to the general, who at once wrote a message to Marshal Bazaine, and signed it.

"Come on, Hosay," then commanded Ridley. "You and I will ride hard and bring the gal to this place. You may expect us to-morrow at noon, Weasel; watch the general close."

And they hurried out of the chamber.

Five minutes after they were speeding through the chaparral, bearing the boon of liberty to Marietta del Reno. Would they be in time?

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOW IN THE CELL.

MAJOR ST. JEAN rode back toward Matamoras with a heart somewhat lightened.

He had little faith in Mejia, and, from the first, that subtle Indian chieftain had been his enemy. He preferred to take his own chance of winning his way with the proud Mexican girl to taking any help from Mejia, and hoped, in his secret heart, that the general had fallen into the hands of Conejos, or any guerrilla who would show him no mercy.

But they rode furiously, and in due time the

towers of Matamoras rose before them. The news quickly spread through the city that Mejia was taken, and while his own adherents raged—and they were not few in numbers—the majority of the officers, particularly those of foreign birth, were glad when they heard that he was out of the way.

With Bazaine it was different. He was tired of the country, and wished to get out of it as quickly as possible, and looked to Mejia to take his place when he should retire. He paced the floor of his quarters furiously, raging like a tiger, until Rivera and St. Jean were announced and admitted.

"Ha, Victor!" he cried, angrily; "is this the way you celebrate your promotion?"

"I think Colonel Rivera will do me the justice to say that I am not to blame," replied St. Jean; "and, as far as I know, neither is he. It is the cursed lancers, who will not stand the charge of these devils of wild Yankees."

"Good faith, major, I think you met them once on more than equal terms and did not meet any better fortune at their hands," sneered Rivera.

"Enough of this," exclaimed Bazaine. "Make your report, gentlemen!"

Rivera told his story first; then St. Jean corroborated his statement as far as he knew, and added that he had pursued Gideon's Band some distance, but had been forced to retreat before vastly superior numbers. Bazaine stood for a moment in deep thought.

"It is fate, I think," he said, at last. "I cannot see that you have failed to do your duty, gentlemen, and the overconfidence of Mejia himself has brought this trouble upon him. You say this Don Ignacio disappeared, also?"

"Completely; it seemed as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up," replied Rivera.

"Wonderful, wonderful! I am completely puzzled how to account for this strange event. But, by my faith, we must do something to rescue him, if we can. Or, at best, I will sweep yonder refuge for these jackals from end to end."

"It is the best plan," declared Victor, eagerly. "If we then found these American interlopers, they should not trouble us long."

"They are, apparently, very hard to light on," replied Bazaine. "Already they have managed so well as to cut off three trains from Queretaro, with much-needed supplies, and the roads are no longer safe. I might have known that when their own war was off their hands those who were not yet tired of fighting would come across the border. But it matters little to me, and yet— You are dismissed, gentlemen."

"I have a personal favor to ask, marechal," said Victor. "I should have asked it of Mejia, but in his absence I am obliged to depend on you. I wish to visit the prisoner, Marietta del Reno. She was once betrothed to me."

Bazaine hastily scribbled an order, which he gave to the young officer, and who then went out quickly, with a grim smile upon his face. He at once passed through a long corridor into the hall of the dungeons. Not far from the door of the cell, he found a guard stationed at the prison-door of Marietta.

Showing his order the guard stood aside and the major opened the door of the cell. As he entered the girl sprung back to the wall with a revolver drawn.

"Put up the weapon, ma belle," he said, laughing. "On the honor of a gentleman I will not lay a finger on you."

"Your word is good, sir," she replied. "There may be peace between us, but with some space between us also. Why do you come here?"

"Because I have something to say to you. You are aware that General Mejia designed to have you shot?"

"Yes, and I am ready to die for Mexico!" was the proud answer.

"No doubt! but there is an alternative, if you would take it."

"And that is—"

"To marry me."

A scornful laugh broke from the lips of the girl.

"I have told you often, Victor St. Jean, that I would sooner lie in my grave than be your wife."

"Of two great evils, choose ye the least," he said, with his mocking laugh. "You must certainly prefer me to death."

"You are mistaken, sir; I would sooner die!"

"You must indeed hate me bitterly," he returned. "But, señorita, if, in the heat of pas-

sion I have done you wrong—and I know it—I have repented the wrong deeply. But consider how I was placed. Accused of permitting you to escape because I loved you, I was driven out of Matamoras in disgrace, and the only way I could redeem myself was to bring you back. I risked my life to do it, and succeeded. If you had listened to me, and had given me your love, my sword might have aided the cause you love so well."

"That is a long speech, major, she retorted. "I see that you have gained the prize for which you sought so ardently and so long, and now have higher rank. I am of Mexican blood, and that I love my native land, and love it well, no one will seek to deny. Many a time I have periled my life to do her service, and the name of Marietta del Reno is known in every camp as one of the most daring spies of Juarez. Nothing has saved me, so far, but the fact that I am a woman, but that will not save me now that the tiger, Mejia, has me in his power. Go! I will kill myself with my own hand before I will be your wife!"

"Have your will, then," answered St. Jean, in a voice thick with passion. "But, as sure as I live, I will break your pride or I will break your heart—I care but little which."

"You have work before you," was the scornful reply. "Dastard! I will go out bravely to be shot as a spy, and meet my fate with joy, but I will never be your wife. I loathe you Kah!"

He made a sudden spring, and she had time to fire one shot, the bullet grazing his shoulder, and the next moment she was in his grasp.

"Now I have you, girl," he hissed. "By Heaven, you shall do as I say!"

"Is this the way you keep your word, villain?" she demanded. "Take your hands from me or I will cry for help."

"Cry out, if you will," he replied, mockingly, as he tore the revolver from her grasp. "Sound does not travel far in these dungeons."

"It travels further than you think, you durned French thief!" cried a manly voice.

"Take that, you dirty brute!"

The next moment St. Jean was rolling on the floor of the cell, and over him stood the manly form of Jack Ridley, his face flushed with indignation.

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVING THE WOLF.

"KILL him," screamed St. Jean, rising upon his elbow, and looking for the guards. "Fifty Napoleons to the man who brings him down."

But Jack Ridley drew his revolver with a flourish, and the ominous click told that he, too, was ready for business.

"I'd just admire to see the man that dare lift a finger against me," the Nebraskan said, quietly. "Come on, boys! I'm waiting for ye; waiting and anxious."

The guards drew back. They had heard of this man from their comrades, and had but little desire to tempt his aim, which was not likely to fail him. While they stood, undecided, hasty steps were heard, and Bazaine himself came in quickly.

"This shall be looked to, Major St. Jean," he said. "When I gave you an order to visit the prisoner, I did not suppose you meant to assault the lady in this brutal way. Señora, I offer you my apologies for leaving you here so long, but while you were the prisoner of General Mejia, he had full control of you. You are to follow me at once. Señor Captain, I wait for you."

Jack Ridley coolly placed his pistols in his belt and followed the marechal, who did not deign a word more to the major, except a motion which signified that he was to follow.

They passed out of the vaults, through the long passages, and came into the inhabited part of the castle and went at once to Bazaine's quarters.

"Come in, St. Jean," ordered the marechal. "I hope you will be able to explain this outrage on a prisoner, but I very much fear that you will not find a good plea."

"I acted by the orders of General Mejia, who had control of the prisoner," he said, sullenly.

"Ah! Señora del Reno is no longer a prisoner, for she is to be exchanged for General Mejia, who is in the hands of the American captain."

"Don Ignacio Vanero, at your service," Jack suggested, with a bow.

"It was bravely done, and the man who could carry out such a plot as that ought to belong to our side," said Bazaine. "But I will not tempt

you further, only to warn you that, if Mejia ever gets *you* into his hands, all the power of the emperor will scarcely save your life."

"Twas done for Señora del Reno's sake, sir," answered Jack. "I ain't a spy; don't come natural to me, somehow, but I made up my mind to take her out of the hands of them two p'izen snakes, Mejia and St. Jean."

"And you have done it bravely. Will you go to-night?"

"I'd rather do that," was the answer.

"You will be safe here until morning."

"I don't doubt you, marshal; but, don't you see that the gal's father is mourning for her and won't feel easy until he knows she is safe?"

"You shall have an escort as far as the chaparral," assured Bazaine. "Further than that my men would not care to go. Call a guard there, orderly, and send Colonel Rivera and my adjutant to me."

The two officers quickly entered the room and waited for orders.

"You, Colonel Rivera," explained Bazaine, "will take one hundred men from your regiment and escort this gentleman and lady as far as the great chaparral. There you must wait for the return of General Mejia, who is a prisoner. Once he returns, you are under his orders."

Rivera bowed, saluted, and went to call his men.

"Adjutant Delorme," continued the Marshal, "Major St. Jean is under arrest. You will take his sword."

"I have no sword," replied St. Jean, quietly.

"You are under arrest; go!"

St. Jean, before following the adjutant from the room, turned for a moment to the smiling Jack.

"May my hopes turn to ashes if I do not take vengeance upon you for the blow you gave me," he hissed.

"Always willing, major; you'll be welcome to any fight you can cook with me. I'd ruther fight you than go to Congress—so I would," was the Nebraskan's retort.

"And as for you, Marietta del Reno—"

"Go, Major St. Jean," repeated Bazaine, sternly. "How dare you stop to bandy words before me?"

St. Jean retired without another word, white with his anger and disgrace.

"He's a bad egg, that chap," declared the Northerner, in his quiet way; "the wu'st I see'd in fourteen counties. Waal, I'll say one thing for you, Marshal: you've acted white; you've done just as you agreed, and I'll think better of Frenchmen for your sake."

"I am glad to hear that you think well of me, my friend," declared Bazaine, laughingly. "But be careful I do not have to hang you some day, for if you come into my lines in disguise again and I can catch you, it will go hard with you."

"I'll be mighty keerful, for Mejia would hang me anyhow," replied Jack, "and I ain't quite ready for that performance yet."

The orderly entered and announced the escort. Then General Bazaine accompanied them to the castle gate and bade them a hearty good-by, and they rode away, one upon each side of Colonel Rivera, followed by the escort, with whom Jose was chatting as he rode. They soon reached the edge of the chaparral, where they halted.

"Have you a man who knows the chaparral?" demanded Jack.

"Manuel Garcia is here," replied the colonel.

"He'll do. Oh, you skunk of misery!" the Nebraskan cried, as Manuel rode out, "I ought to larrup you with a stirrup-leather until you yelled like a sick calf. But come along, p'izen; good-by, colonel. We'll send out the general with Manuel."

They left the lancers on the edge of the chaparral and rode in. Half an hour's ride brought them in sight of the chaparral, and, as they cleared the opening, Jack Ridley uttered a fierce oath, and drawing his revolvers dashed into the midst of a group of men who were surrounding a tree.

In their midst, his face pale, his eyes starting from his head as he struggled vainly with the men about him, was General Mejia! The party about him consisted of only eight or ten men wearing the fanciful garb of the chaparral guerrillas, and all were wildly excited.

What were they about to do?

The quick eyes of the American had taken this in at a glance; they were about to kill him, and in a way which would only have been thought of by men of Indian blood. A rope was about his neck and passed over a limb above, and, just as the Nebraskan appeared upon the edge of the glade, the men at the end of the

rope ran their prisoner up, while wild bursts of laughter were heard from the lookers-on, prominent among whom was a burly, dark-browed man, glittering in gold lace and bullion fringe, who laughed more loudly than the rest.

This man was Conejos, and Conejos hated Mejia as few men were ever hated in all time.

"Curse you, Mejia!" he cried; "I will make you die by inches; inch by inch, second by second, you black-hearted dog! Hold him there, Roderigo! Now let him down!"

Mejia was lowered again, and the rope about his neck loosened. His face had not changed from its usual impenetrable look, for his stern Indian nature had taught him how to die with shut teeth.

The guerrilla laughed savagely.

"When my brother pleaded to you for his life, you laughed him to scorn, Mejia, but it is my turn now. Do you know what I am going to do with you, dog? I will bend two strong young trees together and hang you up, to howl away your life among the branches, with a tree on each side, struggling to spring back into its place. But give him another taste of the rope; up with him, *amigos!*"

And again the body of Mejia rose into the air.

It was at this moment that, with a howl of rage, Jack Ridley burst into the midst of the guerrillas, and knocked them right and left by repeated blows of the heavy revolver which he held by the barrel.

"Take that, you cursed yaller thief!" he cried. "And you, and you, and you!" striking down a man with each repetition of the pronoun. "Cl'ar the road for the untamed wolverine of the big Rockies! Make way for the unloosed cyclone of the North!"

The guerrillas, taken utterly by surprise, were driven back before the terrible arm of the gallant American, while Marietta, who had boldly followed him, cut Mejia down by a sweep of her dagger. Much as she hated the man, bitter as he was in his enmity to her family, she would not see him die this dog's death, for at least he was a brave man.

"Now by all the saints," cried Conejos, "he is a brave man who comes between the Wolf of the Del Norte and his revenge. What would you here, Americano—dog?"

"What in thunder are you doing with my prisoner?" shouted Jack. "Now, see here; I don't vally ten Greasers more than a pin-head. I've foun't em till I know their measure, and I'm just boiling to lick the whole kit and caboodle out and out! You hear?"

"You do not know me, my friend," replied the guerrilla, fiercely. "Perhaps, when you hear the name of Conejos—"

"Oh yes, I know ye," replied Jack, quietly. "Don't ye remember the time you chased a party of Navajoes toward the mountains, and they turned on you and whipped you most beautifully, when ten free trappers b'iled in and knocked the stuffing out of 'em? Hey?"

"I remember," replied Conejos, eagerly.

"What did you say to the leader of that party?" demanded Jack.

"If you repeat the words, I shall know that you are one of them," was the answer.

"You said: 'I have an unquenchable hate of anything which bears the name of American, and yet, in the time to come, should any one of you give me this sign (making a peculiar motion) and demand the life of my worst enemy, he should have his will.' Is that straight, Conejos?"

"You are the man," answered Conejos, slowly. "Well, what do you ask?"

"I'll tell you. I went into Matamoras and took Mejia with my own hand, because he had Marietta del Reno prisoner, and I wanted him to change for her. I told him if he'd give me an order to set her free, I'd give him his liberty, and I'll do as I say, if I have to fight for it."

"Then you demand the prisoner?"

"You bet I do!"

"He is yours; dispose of him as you see fit. Is my debt paid, brave American?"

"Yes; and I'll say one thing of you, Conejos: if you are tough, you are square, and I'll do as much for you another time. How do you feel, general?"

"You came just in time, but I will let yonder dog know that his tortures would not have wrung a single cry from me."

"I reckon that's so. Here, Manuel, you sneak-thief, come out of that!"

Garcia, who had kept prudently in the background, now rode out.

"This fellow will take you where your men

are waiting for you, general. Where is my man, the Weasel?"

"My wolves have tied him," Conejos answered. "Go, some of you, and set him free!"

The Weasel came out, looking somewhat crest-fallen. Being upon his parole not to attempt to escape, Mejia had asked to breathe the fresh morning air, and the two had come out of the ruins, only to be pounced upon by Conejos and his men. Not wishing to do the man any harm, Conejos had tied him, hand and foot, and left him in the ruins, while he vented his rage upon the man he so fiercely hated.

"I want you to give me your word to one thing, general," said Ridley. "Promise that you won't set any men upon my track in ten hours. Will you do that?"

"Yes," replied Mejia. "It shall be as you wish."

"Go with them, Weasel," ordered Jack. "Take my horse, general, and this man will bring it back."

Mejia mounted, without a word. The two men followed him, the Weasel running by the side of his horse; but, as he rode away, Mejia gave them a look of deadly enmity, and the guerrillas knew that they had made an enemy who would be revengeful unto death.

CHAPTER XIV.

"FIVE HUNDRED DOUBLOONS REWARD."

MEJIA, upon joining the squadron under the command of Rivera, dismissed the Weasel, giving back the horse which he had ridden, up to this time, and sending a grim message to Jack Ridley, to the effect that he should remember him, and, in the time to come, would try to repay him with interest for what he had done. Then the troop set out at racing speed for Matamoras, which they reached in the gray dawn.

Going to his quarters, Mejia at once sat down and wrote this order, which was soon posted all about the city:

"500 DOUBLOONS REWARD"

"For the person, dead or alive, of the American, known in the rebel army as Captain John Ridley."

"The same reward will be given for satisfactory proof that he is dead."

"An additional sum of 200 doubloons will be given to the person who shall give information leading to his capture, and the commissioned, or non commissioned officer, or private making the capture, shall receive the above reward."

"(Signed),

MEJIA."

This order caused great commotion among the needy men in the imperial army. The mouths of more than one man literally "wavered" as he thought of the doubloons, and many were the consultations among the men who hungered after the coveted prize.

Bazaine, hearing of the return of the general, at once paid him a visit in his quarters.

"Say nothing about this unlucky escapade of mine, Monsieur le Marechal," he requested. "Let us get to business. Do you know where Major Victor St. Jean can be found?"

"He is under arrest."

"For what offense?"

Bazaine told the story as he had heard it, and Mejia sat for some time in deep thought.

"I think he had better be freed from arrest, marechal. To tell the truth, he acted, in part, by my orders, although I did not bid him carry the affair so far. But, he is a young man, and deeply in love with this fair devil—for she is nothing else—and may be pardoned. If you would do me a favor, you will send an order to set him free, and return his sword."

"With pleasure, general. Now, after I have sent an order, we will get to work, for these wasps must be brushed away from before us. They say that Escobedo is gathering a formidable force, and intends to give us battle. Oh that he would come out of his den and meet us!" cried Bazaine, as he opened the door to speak to the orderly. Then he came back, and the two had a long consultation. In the midst of it St. Jean was announced.

"Let him come in," commanded Mejia eagerly. "Ha, major; you have been in trouble, I learn?"

"Yes; but thanks to you, general, I am free. Monsieur le Marechal was not too severe, for I own that I was rash in what I did."

"You will not offend again. But look you, major; would you like a chance at this Captain Ridley?" demanded Bazaine.

"Only give me a chance, my marechal, and I will give myself no rest, night or day, until I am dead or I have killed the scoundrel who has twice disgraced me by a blow."

"You will take two hundred hussars. Let

them all be picked men and all French, with only enough Mexicans for guides. Get upon the track of this North American dare-devil, and never leave him until you give a good account of him."

"You may depend upon me. Where was he when last seen?"

"In the great chaparral, where you met him last," answered Mejia, with almost savage promptness.

"Is Manuel Garcia here?"

"Yes, he came back with me."

"I want him. There is not a better guide to the chaparral in all the country than Manuel; he will do the work, and do it well, for he, too, hates this accursed Northerner."

"Very good; take him, and be off as quickly as you can," ordered Bazaine.

St. Jean hurried from the room, and at once began his preparations. The men were ready to follow him always, for no one could say that Victor St. Jean was not brave. On the contrary, he was brave even to rashness, and the true soldier likes hazardous service. Garcia was eager for the work, and in less than two hours the hot-headed St. Jean was riding out of the city with two hundred mounts—two hundred chosen for their known skill and courage, who would follow where St. Jean dared to lead. And that they were to hunt down Gideon's Band excited their wildest enthusiasm.

St. Jean did not head at once for the chaparral. Far from that; he went swinging down the road to the north, along the river-bank, as if going upon a distant expedition, for the spies of Juarez were everywhere, and no movement could be made by the imperial troops without their knowledge.

Therefore he kept on his way for several miles, never turning bridle, until, at last, by the suggestion of Garcia, they turned across country to reach the chaparral, into which they plunged boldly and were at once lost to mortal sight.

"Be careful, now!" warned Manuel. "This is a very nest of guerrillas, and if we meet troops enough to hold us for an hour, the noise of battle will bring a thousand chaparral wolves upon our backs."

"I only ask half an hour to wipe this band of Yankee devils from the face of the earth," was the reply of St. Jean.

Garcia laughed in his low, malicious manner.

"They are hard nuts to crack, major. In all my time I have never seen such devils on a charge. They are like loosened lightning."

"I care not. We will beat them if we ever get them at the point of our sabers. And, bear in mind, the captain must be taken alive, if it be possible. I want him."

An hour later, from the cover of the surrounding chaparral, St. Jean was looking in upon the opening in which lay the hidden city. The place was desolate. The wind sighed through the branches of the trees; bright birds darted here and there and the ground was beaten down by horses' hoofs; scattered here and there lay bits of broken harness, a shattered cuirass, a torn saddle-blanket or a broken spur, to show where the battle had raged, and a long, broken piece of turf showed where the dead had been laid to rest under the bending boughs.

"They are gone!" said Garcia. "I had little hope that they would be here."

"Perhaps they are in the ruins," suggested the major.

"I doubt it; but that is soon seen. None know the secrets of the hidden city better than Manuel Garcia."

The squadron filed into the opening and paused before the rocky wall which guarded the secret entrance. At a touch from the hand of the half-breed the stone slipped aside, and a dozen men with their weapons ready went down the stone steps.

Garcia caught up a torch of resinous wood, evidently always left there to light the way into the hidden covert. This he lighted, and holding it above his head entered before the others. The light of the torch revealed upon the walls the mystic signs of the race which had passed away—the lordly and accomplished Aztec.

On, through passage after passage, tramped the men, scarcely noticing the beauties of the buried temple; but all was silence and vacancy. Not a human being was lurking therein.

Satisfied that they were wasting time St. Jean ordered a return.

"Come!" cried Manuel. "I will find them, if they are upon the earth above."

And, soon in the outer world again, the squadron filed a way through the dim chaparral upon the trail of Gideon's Band.

CHAPTER XV.

THREE AGAINST TWO HUNDRED.

JACK RIDLEY did not remain long in the hidden city after the general had departed.

He knew well that there was no safety for him there while the fire of hate burned in the dark bosom of Mejia, and in half an hour the little party, with Jose as a guide, were hurrying away through the darkness. Conejos had gone his way, with many compliments to Jack and his men, and they were left to their own resources.

Their course was necessarily slow, and daylight found them scarcely ten miles, in a direct line, from the place they had left that night. They were still in the depths of the chaparral, but, as daylight showed itself, they accelerated their speed.

"Where does my father lie with his men?" asked Marietta.

"He was to be near the ruins of the hacienda at noonday," replied Jose.

"Then to the hacienda we will go," said Marietta.

They emerged from the chaparral at last and came out upon the ancient domain of the Del Reno family. A magnificent estate it was, stretching away for leagues, and showing the hand of thrist in every acre. In times of peace five hundred men had earned their bread by doing the work of the gallant colonel. Now they were scattered here and there, although most of them were fighting under the banner of their former leader, and doing good service, too.

Half an hour's ride brought them to the hacienda. It was built after the Mexican fashion, with a high stone wall surrounding it; but the walls were in ruins, and the shattered gates lay just within the entrance, as they had been thrown down by the cannon of Mejia. For, when Matamoras was first taken, the hacienda had been the scene of a dreadful massacre, when a few hundred men of Escobedo's army had been surrounded by ten times their number of Mejia's men, and for three days resisted gallantly, until cannon were brought against them. Even then, when the gates were beaten down, they fought to the very last, asking no quarter and receiving none, until the last of the gallant men lay dead upon the earth outside, in the long corridors of the hacienda, and upon the *azoteas*. A sad look came into the eyes of Marietta as she gazed upon the walls of her ruined home.

"Alas," she cried, "poor unhappy Mexico, how long shall you see such scenes as this? Will the time never come when there will be peace within your borders?"

"I'll tell you one thing, señora," said Jack Ridley, "your people are too fond of revolutions. Once in a hundred years we are going to have one in the great United States, but when it comes to more, that is piling on the agony. Then again, your folks are cruel; they like to see blood flow, particularly if it is the blood of their enemies. Just look over your history from the time Cortez stood on the Mexican causeways, and tell me if it ain't so."

"You are right, señor; until we learn to show mercy we shall not receive it. It is a sad home to which I welcome you, but you are welcome, nevertheless."

It was nearly eight o'clock when they entered the hacienda. It showed on every hand the marks of the desperate encounter. Upon the great stairway which led to the upper rooms the last of the defenders had made a gallant stand, and the walls, hand-rail and steps still bore dark red spots, the blood of these brave men.

"No man can look at this and say that there are no noble men in Mexico," declared Marietta, her cheeks flushing; "but these were gentlemen, most of them, and they died as Mejia will die, with set teeth. Let us go up to the *azotea*."

They went up to the flat roof of the hacienda. "Look," said Marietta, laying her hand upon the coping of the *azotea*. "Upon this spot stood the last of the defenders of the hacienda, Pedro Burgos, of Monterey. With fourteen wounds upon him, he turned here to pierce the foremost of his assailants to the heart, and then plunged head foremost upon the stone flags below."

"It was bravely done," cried Jack, whose eyes were fixed upon the distant chaparral; "but just look there; don't you think we had better light out?"

There was no need of haste. Perhaps three miles away, coming up at a swinging trot, were the hussars of St. Jean. Even at that distance Jack Ridley could make out the brilliant uniforms.

"St. Jean, by the living hokies! That boy will make me mad, first thing he knows, and if he does, may I never sup soup if I don't climb him. Come on."

They sprung down the stairs together, got to the saddle, and went thundering away across the fertile fields, heading to the West. They knew well that the relentless man upon their track would never turn bridle as long as there was a chance of riding them down, and it was a race for life or death.

Five minutes later they plunged into a pass between the hills, but as they passed in they were seen, and the bugle-blast which came on the wind warned them that the hussars had increased their speed.

"I can save my mistress if you are brave enough to hold them back five minutes, capitán," cried Jose.

"We'll do it, the Weasel and me," said Jack, promptly. "Go on."

"I will not go!" cried Marietta.

"Girl," murmured Jack Ridley, in a tender voice, "I'm a rough, hard man, and I know it; but I tell you now that it will make me happy to die for your sake. Won't you go and give me a chance?"

"No, no!" cried Marietta.

"But see here, little one; you know what will happen if you fall into Mejia's hands again. And what's the use? Better that you two escape than all be taken. I'll die all the happier if you let me kiss your hand."

Marietta bent in the saddle and pressed her lips to the bearded ones of Jack Ridley.

"Yo te amo,"* she whispered, fervently. "I vow to the Virgin, brave man, that if you and I are alive when this war is done, I will be your wife."

It was a strange betrothal, and perhaps, under other circumstances, the avowal of Marietta del Reno might have seemed unmaidenly, but now it was only a vow given to one doomed to die.

"That settles it, sweet one," said Jack. "Now save yourself, and if I go down a prayer from such sweet lips as yours may help a tough old fellow through. God bless you."

"I go alone!" cried Marietta. "Let them take you at the last, and I will rescue you or die. Stay here, Jose."

The swift steed shot out like an arrow from a strong bow, and went thundering down the pass, while Jose silently took his place beside Jack Ridley.

"Take hold here, boys; let's make a barricade!" cried Jack.

They worked rapidly, and piled up across the narrow pass boulder upon boulder, until they had built up a barricade nearly six feet high. It was scarcely completed when the thunder of the advancing squadron shook the earth, and there burst into the pass the hussars of St. Jean. They had spread out in the chase and dashed in by twos and threes, but did not see the barricade until they were close upon it.

Then up sprung Jack Ridley and the Weasel, a revolver in each hand, and a terrible fusilade began.

These two had used the revolver so long that they were simply perfect; when they pulled, something must be hit, and the deadly weapons did fearful work. Every time the sharp crack was heard a hussar went down, killed or wounded, and they fell back before the deadly fire in utter dismay, leaving several of their comrades extended on the sod.

"Keep back, major," shouted Le Blanc. "We can do nothing with the horses, for they have a barricade."

"Dismount," commanded the major, sternly. "Charge on foot, and be careful you do not hurt the girl. She is mine, and save the Yankee captain if you can. He must not be allowed to escape, but I will give one hundred doubloons to the man or men who brings him to me alive."

The hussars leaped from the saddle, and with the sharp battle-yell which only a Frenchman can utter, they charged into the pass. By this time the empty chambers in the revolvers were all full, and five of these terrible weapons were ready; for Marietta, as she dashed away, had dropped hers at the feet of Jose.

The slaughter was awful.

The pass, at this point, was scarcely seven feet wide, with almost perpendicular sides. If they won it they must charge straight up to the barricade, and force it at the points of their sabers.

But, though they had ever so much wish to do so, retreat was impossible. Some of the foremost turned back, indeed, but they were quickly

* I love thee.

pushed forward by those in the rear, only to fall before the fatal aim of Jack and the Weasel. Even Jose, not accustomed to the weapon, could not miss with such a mark, and the space in front of the barricade became a very slaughter-pen. The desperation which could nerve three men to withstand two hundred, added to the terror they inspired.

But, after all, such a fray could not last long. Up to this time not one of the hussars had got near enough to strike a blow, but the cartridges were failing, and even if this were not so, they had not time to remove the empty shells and substitute new ones.

"Oh, come up to me, you pea-soup-eating Parley voo!" roared Jack, as he saw St. Jean gesticulating in the background. "I'd like a whack at you; oh, do come."

It was not lack of courage which kept the major, but he could not break through the crowd of his own men, although he tried to do so. Jack fired his last shot at St. Jean, but one of the men passed before him just at the right moment, and received the ball in his throat.

Ridley cast down the empty weapon and caught up his rifle. It was not loaded, and he grasped it by the muzzle and prepared to use it as a club. On each side stood Jose and the Weasel, armed with sabers, and they met the rush of the hussars right gallantly, while the iron-bound butt of the rifle fell with sickening thuds upon the heads of the Frenchmen.

The tumult was maddening. Mingled with the "Sacres!" "Parbleus!" and "Scelerats!" of the French rose the resounding battle-cry of Jack Ridley, the sharp Southern yell of the Weasel, and the manly shout of Jose, who fought like a gallant man. Packed as they were in the narrow defile, the hussars could only come at the barricade three or four abreast, and for a time these three brave men attended to them as they came on.

But the strongest arm will tire, and Jack Ridley was growing sick of slaughter.

"What say, Jose; d'ye think the gal is safe by this?" he demanded, as he struck down a bearded hussar who was preparing his saber for a stroke.

"Safe enough," replied Jose, giving "point" as he spoke, and thrusting a Frenchman through the heart.

"Then run for it, you two. I'll keep them back two minutes, and one of you may get away. Off you go, Weasel."

"Not one step!" replied Jose.

"Nary time, Cap," cried the Weasel. "We can't die any younger."

Then the hussars forced their way over the barricade and surrounded the three gallant men. For a moment they struggled, and then went down amid a storm of imprecations; but their gallant stand had been successful, for Marietta was safe from pursuit!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN DURANCE VILE.

YES, St. Jean had conquered, but at what a cost! He felt, as he looked down upon the prostrate form of Jack Ridley, that even his capture was poor payment for the dead and wounded piled in front of the barricade. He stamped furiously upon the earth, and Ridley expected to hear an order to take him out and shoot him, but the order was not given.

They numbered the dead—twenty! They counted the wounded, some of them seriously, and found nearly one-third as many more—fifty men put *hors du combat* by three!

"What a tale this will be to tell in Matamoras," cried the young major. "Sergeant, this way."

Le Blanc followed him to one side.

"How many men did we fight with, sergeant?"

Le Blanc stared as he replied:

"Three."

"Are you not mistaken, sergeant? Could you not put the number, in telling the story, at about fifty, behind a good barricade?"

Le Blanc struck his thigh with his open palm, and laughed loudly.

"Aha, Monsieur le Major; it would be a hard tale to tell in Matamoras that two hundred of the hussars lost so many in beating three men. *Sang Dieu!* let us make them a hundred."

"As you will, only see that the rest of the men are of the same opinion as yourself."

"No fear that they will need more than a hint. Shall we bury the dead here?"

"Why not? We cannot cumber ourselves with them, and it will be trouble enough to attend to the wounded. Bury them at once, sergeant."

They found a place in the bed of a dry water-

course, and here they laid the dead side by side and covered them hastily with leaves and sod. They dared not linger long over the work, for they knew that the sound of the battle had been heard, and that the guerrillas who infested the chaparral would soon flock to the spot as vultures to a feast.

"Are those two men hurt?" demanded the major. "Not the captain; the other two."

"Not badly," replied Le Blanc.

"We don't want them," declared St. Jean. "Give them the fusilade."

The Weasel and Jose were now unbound and led forward. Twenty dismounted hussars, with their carbines unslung, advanced before the rest.

"Hullo; hold on there, major," cried Jack; "are you going to pass me over that way?"

"What do you want?"

"I want to die with the others. Never, if I live a thousand years, could I die in braver company."

"We have other work for you, my good friend," replied St. Jean, with a grim smile. "Go on, sergeant."

"Feu, camarades!" cried Le Blanc.

The twenty carbines spoke together, and when the smoke lifted Weasel Wilson and Jose lay side by side, each pierced by many balls. Leaving them where they lay, Jack was bound to his saddle and the squadron set out, taking a course which led some distance from the chaparral.

"I'd like to say a word, major," said Jack. "Why do you take me to the city; why not finish me here?"

"Silence, dog," replied the major, "or I will strike you in the face."

"You did that once afore, major, and it was not healthy for you."

St. Jean laid his hand upon his dagger, and Jack, who did not wish to taste the tender mercies of General Mejia, hoped that he meant to kill him, but he was disappointed.

"No, no!" he said. "Mejia will find another death for you to die, and perhaps it will be worse than any I can give you. May all the saints guard your head on the day when you fall into the hands of the Indian chief."

They rode as hard as they dared, for many wounded were among them, and a swift journey was out of the question. But they had rare good fortune and escaped all dangers, entering Matamoras before the sun had reached meridian.

The city was at once in tumult. People thronged from all sides to see the wonderful man who had captured Mejia, and who, single-handed, had met and conquered the hussars, defeated St. Jean and cut up the escort upon the Jalapa road. He sat calmly in his saddle, looking about him with a pleasant smile.

"Glad to see me, ain't they?" he said, directing a searching look upon the scowling faces of the French soldiery. "Just see, how they crowd up; seems as if they never see a man afore—the cursed Parley Vocs."

"Look here," said the major, pointing to the wall of a building. "Read that and see how much Mejia loves you."

It was the proclamation of Mejia, printed in large letters, offering a reward for the apprehension of John Ridley.

"That's me," cried Jack. "Good Lord! who'd a' thought that this old carcass would ever be worth as much money asthat? Strange, strange! I begin to have a high opinion of my own good qualities."

Yet the eyes of this strange man were busy, and even as he rode, bound hand and foot, through the busy street, he was watching the varying expressions upon the faces which he saw in passing. He read upon those of the French, and the immediate adherents of Mejia, the most deadly hate, while at times a face looked up at him which had much of sympathy in it.

"Some of these chaps don't like the Frenchers," he thought. "I wonder if I couldn't git one of 'em to give me a lift now."

But not one of them made any sign. Mexicans to the heart's core, and loving their native land, they were yet too much under the iron rule of Mejia to dare lift a hand, and they saw this brave man go by in the midst of his angry captors, whose thin ranks showed that he had not been taken without a desperate struggle.

"Pardieu, Le Blanc," said a stalwart hussar, as he walked by the side of the sergeant's horse. "How many of these devils did you meet?"

"A hundred or more, mon ami, entrenched in a pass, which we were obliged to force on foot."

"How many did you say, sergeant?" asked Jack.

"Silence, devil!"

"I like to set the boys right," declared Jack, addressing the questioner in the Canadian-French *patois*. "We were three only, friend."

"He lies!" roared Le Blanc.

"No, he don't, Frenchy. We three fought you fairly, and when we went down, we was crowded into the ground; that's all about it."

"Silence in the ranks!" cried St. Jean. "Clear the way there, canaille!"

The hussars swept on through the crowded streets at a more rapid pace, after the wounded had fallen out to go to their quarters. But as they went the number running upon both sides grew greater, until a great mob were clustered about the doors of headquarters as the party passed through into the court-yard. St. Jean cut the bonds upon the hands and feet of the prisoner, and ordered him to dismount. He was instantly surrounded by four hussars, each of whom carried his drawn sword in his hand.

They entered the wide doors and reached the quarters of General Mejia. Aroused by the strange clamor, he came to the door, and as he saw the captain in the midst of the hussars, a look of fierce joy lighted up his face.

"Welcome!" he cried, "a thousand times welcome. Monsieur Le Major, you are colonel of the hussars, vice Ragolet, promoted to a demi-brigade. But I shall claim your prisoner."

"He is yours, general. I doubt not you will give quite as good an account of him as I ever could."

"And the reward?"

"Divide it among my men; they deserve it."

"Yes, general," said Jack, "they certainly do. When two hundred hussars pitch in bravely and lick out three men, they just heap undying honor on their names, especially when they lose fifty trying it on."

"You would do well to be silent, my good friend," said Mejia. "I have heard your boasting people talk before."

"But it's true. We three fought two hundred hussars half an hour, while Marietta got away. I didn't mention that to you, major; thought it might make you wrathful."

"Look to yourself, dog, and beware how you drive me to extremes, for I swear to you that if you force me further I will kill you where you stand," screamed the major.

"Leave me to deal with this man, my dear St. Jean," said the general. "Go to your quarters and remain there until you are sent for. This expedition, even with the great loss of men, has well repaid me. Guards, close around your prisoner and follow me."

Jack Ridley was led down through the depth of the castle dungeons, until at last they stopped before a door formed almost entirely of iron. A man bearing a huge bunch of iron keys came slouching out of a small room.

"Open this door," said Mejia.

The man fitted a huge key to the lock and forced back the heavy bolts. Even then, it required the utmost exertion of his strength to swing the heavy door back on its hinges.

The room was barely ten feet deep and six feet wide. The iron bedstead occupied one end and was covered by a rude straw mattress.

"Enter," said the general.

"Nice room," cried Jack. "Well, as you are so pressing, I guess I'll go in."

"Bring the fettters," commanded Mejia.

The jailer dragged from beneath the bed a heavy set of manacles, which he fastened upon the ankles of the prisoner. They were connected by a chain, and only permitted him to take steps of perhaps six inches in length.

"The waist ring," said the Indian general.

The jailer drew out a heavy iron belt, which he passed about the waist of the prisoner and fastened tightly. The end of the chain was attached to a heavy iron ring in the wall.

"Anchored!" exclaimed Jack. "Seems to me I'm a jewel of rare price."

"I mean to keep you safe, my friend," responded Mejia. "I would not have you die until you know what it is to suffer, and the time will come when you will even pray for death."

They passed out, the heavy door clanged, the bolts shot into their places, and Jack Ridley was left alone. He knew that he was doomed, but, with a smile upon his face, he stretched himself upon his hard bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DOOM PRONOUNCED.

THE court-martial in the case of Jack Ridley was brief, and the doom death. Only Colonel Rivera voted in favor of the prisoner.

"Bring in the accused," said the general, with a look of fierce joy upon his stern face as the

vote was declared. The command was obeyed, and Jack Ridley, with the proud bearing which had marked him throughout, was led into the room.

"Prisoner," said Mejia, "the verdict of the court is entered, and with but a single exception, we are of one mind."

"I should like to know the man who was brave enough, under your eye, to vote 'not guilty,'" declared Ridley. "Stop! I will pick him out myself. There is the man," pointing to Colonel Rivera.

"Why do you say that he is the one?"

"Because I have seen him fight. He led the lancers on the day when I took you prisoner, General Mejia, and I saw that he was the one in all that band who had the heart of a man in his bosom. I saw him strike down his own men when they would not turn and face Gideon's Band, and I warn you that it takes men to face them when they get their armor on. I am to die, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Then I have a favor to ask."

"Ask it."

"Let me be shot instead of hanged. I have been a soldier, and would like to die a soldier's death, if it is all the same to you. Remember that I saved you from a worse fate at the hands of Conejos and his men, and that if I had let them work their will you would not now be in the land of the living."

"It shall be as the court decides," said Mejia, coldly. "You will vote, gentlemen; shall it be death by the cord or the fusillade?"

The vote was quickly given. Knowing that he had been unjustly condemned, they voted for death by the bullet.

"Very well," said Mejia, rising. "The sentence of the court is that you be taken outside the walls of the city, and there shot to death. The day of execution shall be—when I appoint it."

"One more favor and I am done," said Ridley. "I would like to shake the hand of yonder colonel, who did not vote for death."

Rivera sprung up, and without asking permission, approached the prisoner and extended his hand, which was quickly grasped by Ridley.

"Your name, sir?" asked Jack.

"Colonel Gaspard Rivera."

"I am proud to take you by the hand, colonel. Mine has been a rough life, full of strange adventures, and it has been my fate to meet with many brave men. I have a message to give you which I will give to no other man on earth, and it is for the girl I love. Say to Marietta del Reno, if you live to meet her, that John Ridley has done what he could. Say to her that I died happy, for it was in her service I yielded up my life. Good-by, and may God bless you forever for your noble sympathy."

"Return the condemned to his cell, Lieutenant Gomez, and let a guard of two men be placed in his cell, with a relief in two hours. Night and day, until the order comes for his execution, let him be thus guarded. Colonel Rivera, your resignation will be accepted at once."

"It is given," said Rivera, coldly. "There is my commission, general; it has never been dishonored in my hands."

"You have three days in which to leave Matamoras. At the end of that time you will be put under arrest."

"For what, General Mejia. Perhaps it would be better to arrest me now."

Melia glared at the bold man, but he did not quail.

"Go, Gaspard Rivera," he hissed. "No man ever crossed my path who did not one day repent it."

Rivera turned upon his heel, with scarcely a recognition of the general, and at once left headquarters. An hour later he rode out of the city at full speed, attended only by two of his own servants, and headed to the North, and in two days was with the army of Escobedo.

"I look to you, Colonel St. Jean, to see that the prisoner does not escape," said Mejia. "You will have charge of the guard."

"He shall not escape. Give me an order to take charge of him," replied St. Jean.

The court-martial, having done its dirty work, was now dismissed, many of the members feeling that they had done a bad and cruel act. Jack Ridley was returned to his prison, and chained down as before. But the fear of death could not break his manly spirit, and he laughed in the faces of the guards as they riveted on the chains.

"You take a great deal of pains with a man whom you are to guard with loaded muskets, boy," he said. "I wouldn't be a Greaser, not for any money you could offer me; by George,

I wouldn't. Say; couldn't you put an extra pound of iron on somewhere? seems to me I ain't weighted right, so to speak."

The guards performed their work in a stolid manner, and then left the cell, with the exception of the two who remained to mount guard. Ridley kept up a running fire of jokes at their expense, couched in the choicest Mexican. For we must understand that this man had been a free trader and trapper, ranging from Hudson's Bay and Vancouver on the north to Central America on the south. He spoke fluently the languages of the various tribes and nations through which he passed, and it was this which made him so valuable a man.

Two hours passed, and still the guards stood there, leaning on their muskets, and with burning eyes fixed upon their prisoner. Their orders were fixed—to kill him on the spot if he made any attempt to escape. But how was escape possible to a man who had manacles on his feet, handcuffs on his wrists, and an iron ring about his body, made fast to the stone wall?

"You just watch out, my gay and festive ducks," he cried, "or I'll take down this old ranch at one pull. I'm just old Samson when I get on a tare, now you hear me talking."

The man threatened to shoot him if he did not keep quiet.

"Do I care for that, Greaser? Pop away, if you want to, but blame my cats if I believe that you could hit me, lying flat on my back."

His thoughts fairly made the Mexicans rave and Jack kept up the fire. He had no hope of rescue and knew that Mejia would not suffer him to escape. What his purpose was in allowing him to live for a moment after the court-martial had done its work he could not tell; it was enough that his life was spared for some dark purpose.

The two hours ended and the guard was relieved. Noting the time they were on duty he was able to keep the hours and know nearly what time of day or night it was.

His thoughts often turned to Marietta, and his heart beat high as he remembered her avowal when he stopped to guard her flight in that narrow pass. The memory of the passionate kiss she gave him in that supreme moment sent a thrill through him, and he felt more than repaid.

"Come what will," he murmured, "I have been happy for one brief moment, and I know that the sweet girl will weep for the tough old soldier shot down by miscreant hands. If they would only give me half a chance; but then, when a man is loaded down with irons and two guards standing over him with loaded muskets—Blast a lot of men that won't give another man a chance, anyhow."

At this moment the bolts shot back and St. Jean, carrying a lighted lamp, entered the apartment.

"Hullo!" said Jack, "howdy, colonel, howdy? Got a deck of cards anywhere handy? I'd like a little game of draw."

"You will have a harder game than that to play unless you are very careful. I have come to make you an offer," declared St. Jean.

"I don't suppose it will amount to much; but spit it out," was the quiet response.

"I've had a talk with General Mejia, and, although he hates you like death, he knows you are a valuable man and wants to give you a chance. Will you take a commission in the lancers?"

"Hey?"

"You shall be major."

"Do you come in cold blood and offer a man condemned to die a commission under the man who condemned him? By George! if this don't beat my cats."

"Do you accept?"

"See you durned first! There is one thing I would like to do. It would almost tickle me to death if I could have a fair, stand-up fight with you, man to man. But you ain't the man to give me that chance."

"You have sealed your own fate, Captain Ridley. I have an order which says that in twenty-four hours from this time you will be led out for execution."

"I'll be there," said the captain, quietly. "Now leave me alone."

At the appointed hour, in the gray dawn of the morning, he was led out to die.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARIETTA'S VOW—THE YOUNG INDIAN.

As Marietta gave her horse the spur and bounded away it was with a sinking heart, but she knew that all could not be saved, and too late she had learned the value of those heroic men who had stopped to battle in the narrow

pass to save her. She kept up her headlong flight until she entered the dark mountain passes, and knew that she was safe. Urging her horse rapidly up the slope, she reached a plateau which looked down upon the scene of battle. Half-hidden by the rocks, she watched the combat, and her heart thrilled with pride as she saw the three gallant men so long withstand the attack of two hundred.

"Brave hearts; gallant men!" she murmured. "No, no, no; I am not ashamed of loving such a man as that, although he is of another nation."

The battle was over. She saw the brave men go down, and then Jose and the Weasel fell before the carbines of the hussars, and were left lying on the trampled sod, while the shattered squadron rode away toward Matamoras. At that distance it was hard to tell who had been shot down and who had been taken prisoner.

Descending the mountain rapidly, she spurred back over the ground she had just passed over and reached the battlefield. She saw, all about the barricade, the evidences of the fearful struggle just ended, and leaping her horse over the barrier, she reached the spot where Jose and the Weasel lay. The Mexican was lying on his back, and at a glance she saw that he had received one ball in his brain and another in his heart.

"Brave man," she murmured, "your family shall never have cause to repent that you served so well the house of Del Reno."

The Weasel lay upon his face. His clothing was stained with blood in many places, but as she turned from Jose she detected a quivering in his frame, and springing from the saddle, ran to him, and turned him over. His eyes flared open.

"Hit hard, Jack," he murmured, feebly, "but I ain't rubbed out. Hullo! It's the señora come back."

"Where are you hit, señor Wilson?" she asked.

"Pretty much everywhere, señora, but I'm tough. Whar's the capt'in?"

"A prisoner. They have taken him to Matamoras."

"An' me layin' here, weak as a sick cat. Oh, durn the luck!"

"I hear horses' hoofs," declared Marietta, starting up.

A body of horsemen were rounding a point of woods a mile away, and there was no mistaking them; it was the somber-clad Gideon's Band.

Marietta uttered a cry of joy, and began to wave a handkerchief as a signal for them to hasten. At once Gideon's Band turned and came down at full speed, making the air resound with their yells, while Texas Dan, his long hair floating out upon the summer breeze, rode far in advance.

"Whoopie!" cried Dan, as he rode up. "May I never see the back of my neck if I don't lick you out of your moccasins, whosoever you ar', that put Weasel Wilson on his back. Saynora, I greet thee; glad to see ye out'n the clutches of the Phillistynes; I am—indeed."

"Help here, señora," cried Marietta. "He is badly hurt."

"Here, Billy," cried Dan, looking behind him; "get out your prods."

A young man with a pale, almost feminine face, dismounted quickly, and produced a small instrument-case. This was Billy Forsythe, a graduate of the Albany Medical College, who was known among the hard riders of Gideon's Band as Billy Pill-box. In times when his profession was needed he was a skillful surgeon, but in a charge he was a devil, and none rode nearer to the front than he when the bugles sounded the charge, or further in the rear in the retreat.

"Oh, rouse up here, Weasel," he said, roughly. "Let's look at you—thunder! They've made a strainer of you, old fellow."

"Mighty like it," replied Weasel.

Billy Pill-box set to work with rare skill, and in a short time announced that the Weasel had no really bad wounds, and would be around in a week. In the mean time the señora had spoken to Dan, and informed him of the fate of Captain Ridley.

The Texan was perfectly wild with rage. That Jack should succeed so well, and be taken at the moment of victory, was a terrible blow.

"We'll have him out of that if I dig my way through the walls of the prison with tooth and nail," he declared. "Mount, boys; which way did they go, señora?"

"It is useless," she answered. "If you caught them they would be more than a match for you. No, what we do must be done by stratagem, and I will be the first to try my hand."

"You will get nabbed again."

"I must take my chances. See my father and tell him where I have gone, and say that I will not return unless I can save the life of the man who put himself in this deadly peril for my sake."

"Hooray fer you!" cried Dan. "You are the one for my money. When do you go?"

"Immediately. Good-by all, and if I do not come back it will be because I have failed."

She sprung into the saddle and rode away, while Gideon's Band prepared a grave for Jose and laid him down to rest.

At early morning, on the next day, an Indian boy came down the dusty road which led from the chaparral. He was a slight young fellow, with a clear-cut, haughty face, wearing over his fanciful Mexican garb the scarlet blanket which is so much affected by his people. He was stopped at the barrier, but saying that he wished to see Mejia, he was at once taken to him.

"Ha!" said Mejia. "Who have we here?"

"I am one of the blood of the Aztecs, Mejia," replied the boy. "One of the last of the race of Guatemozin."

"Say you so, boy? The people of our race are too few to be other than friends and brothers. What would you here in Matamoras? I am supreme here, since Bazaine went to Mexico."

"I have come to serve Mejia," replied the boy. "See; my arm is not yet strong, but my foot is swift and my hand sure. I could not serve the Frenchman, but I love Mejia because he is of my blood."

"What is your name, my son?"

"I am called Enriquez Gormaz, but my Indian name is Otumba."

"You are welcome, my son. If you will, you shall be one of my attendants."

"For that I came hither, Mejia, and you shall see that I will serve you well. I am a prophet; I can foretell events, and when the spirit speaks to me you shall hear his voice."

The boy attended to the duties imposed upon him with certainty and quickness which pleased Mejia well. He had a high opinion of the race from which he sprung, and looked down with scorn upon the Mexicans proper, and the quickness of the lad pleased him.

When his work was done, the boy seemed to take great pleasure in roaming through the castle. He penetrated all parts, even to the lower halls and corridors in which the prisoners condemned to death were confined.

"Master," he said to Mejia, "as I went through the lower parts of the castle, I saw men guarding an iron door. Who is confined there, that you take such care of him?"

"An Americano, who is condemned to die."

"The one who made you a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"I have heard men say that he is very brave."

"He is; one of the bravest men I ever knew," responded Mejia.

"Then why should he die?"

"Because he is capable of doing us great harm, and he will not take service with me. Much as I hate him, if he would take a commission under me he should have it."

"And he will not serve you; why?"

"Because he has taken a commission under Juarez, and will not break his word, even to save his life. He dies two days hence at sunrise."

A sort of shiver passed through the slight frame of the Indian boy. His eyes, large and luminous, were raised with a peculiar expression.

"Hear me, oh Mejia," he said; "something warns me that your fate is linked with the fate of this man, and that if you kill him it will be the signal for your own death."

"Bah!" cried Mejia; "do you think I am to be frightened at a shadow?"

"Hear the words of Otumba," said the boy, earnestly. "When the spirit of prophecy is on him, his words are true. Let me commune with the spirits of those passed away, the shade of the mighty Sun-god, and he will speak to me. If he says, 'Let him die,' it shall be well with you; if he says, 'Let him live,' better that you should cut off your right hand at the wrist than take his life."

Mejia was superstitious. His Indian blood made him that, if nothing more, and he listened to the boy with a strange feeling of fear in his heart. He recognized the lad as descended from a line of priests and prophets, the best the strange "knotted cord" history of Mexico could furnish. His manner was so lofty and the kindling fire in his dark eyes so terrible that the Indian general doubted.

"Speak to the gods to-night, then, son of Guatemozin. Speak as in the day when from the Cocalli of our pyramids the prophets spoke of old."

"I will do so," replied the boy. "Even this night, when the midnight bell sounds, I will address them, and they will listen to my voice. But, until that time, beware that you do harm to that brave man."

"It is strange that you should speak so warmly of one you have never seen, Otumba."

"I can only speak as I am warned," was the reply of Otumba. "To-night is the appointed hour."

They separated and Otumba, with a strange smile upon his face, went out of the castle and plunged into the heart of the city. Passing through street after street, he paused before a small wine-shop, one of many in the street. There was an air of repose about the place, a quiet home-like appearance which was very inviting.

The young Indian passed at once through the open door and sat down at a low table, in full sight of a number of men who were drinking and smoking. He did not call for anything, but rolling a perfumed cigarette between his thumb and finger, lighted it and began to smoke.

"Mejia's lacquey," growled one of the men nearest to him. "I should think he might find a better place to loiter than Ruy Durango's wine-shop. Hi, Ruy; dost permit such carrion as that to darken your doors?"

The innkeeper, a rather handsome man, somewhat past the middle age, at once came forward.

"Did you call for anything?" he said, in a somewhat surly tone.

"No, Ruy; why should I?"

"You are somewhat familiar."

"And why not, Ruy Durango; who has a better right?" demanded the boy.

"Be that as it may, you would do well to go. All Matamoras knows that you are the Indian pet of General Mejia, and Mejia is not looked upon with rare pleasure by many here."

"Yes; you had better go," growled the man who had spoken first, "or, by St. Dominic, I will take it upon myself to cast you out neck and heels."

The Indian boy made no answer, but, lifting his hand, showed a golden band encircling the middle finger. This he slowly turned, and brought into view a magnificent ruby, upon which was imprinted a single character of a peculiar form. An ejaculation of wonder broke from the lips of Ruy Durango, and with a motion of his hand he drove back the man, who was already rising to carry out his threat.

"Touch him not," he cried, "or I will kill you with my own hand. He is sacred by all the laws of friendship."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FUSILADE—JUST IN TIME.

THE heart of Victor St. Jean was full of savage joy, as, with a hundred men behind him, he rode out of the city with Jack Ridley in their midst. The place of execution was a level space just without the lines, where many a man had fallen already before the deadly aim of the firing parties.

Ridley was calm and serene. He looked back at the castle with a sort of relief, for to a man like him, almost anything was preferable to imprisonment. Yet never, in all his life, had earth and sky appeared to him so beautiful as now. He looked from face to face, and could not see a sign of sorrow upon any there. The men who composed the escort had been of those whom he had fought in the mountain pass, and not one of them but would be glad to see him die. He saw the dark face of Le Blanc, whom he had beaten so soundly upon the road to the river; of the sergeant who commanded the party; of Victor St. Jean, and many more who had lost friends by the power of his arm.

"You chaps are going to see a man die," he said. "'Tain't often that Frenchmen have such a chance twice in the same week. Them two you shot down the day you took me were royal boys, and it will go hard if I do not die as well as they."

St. Jean said nothing, but turned a dark look upon him as he made the circuit of the city and reached the plain. The troop dismounted quickly, and Ridley was led out in front, while a firing party of twenty men took their places.

"Do you wish to have your eyes covered?" demanded St. Jean.

"Why should I, sir? I have looked death in the face before, and why not now? No; let me be free, hand and foot, and I will give the orders."

"Do you desire a priest?"

"No, I am a Protestant, and all I ask is a moment for prayer. I'm a rough man, but the prayers I learned at my mother's knee come to me now, and it will not take me long to say them."

He knelt upon the sod and bent his head in prayer. As he did so there was a movement inside the barrier, and a horseman was seen coming up at a gallop.

"Here comes a messenger, colonel!" cried Le Blanc.

"Never mind that. Keep to your work, and we will attend to the messenger afterward. Are you nearly done, captain? I am in haste."

"Seems to me you are in a mighty hurry, colonel. I don't think it's a square deal for a man to pitch another into eternity without giving him a fair chance to pray. But there; I'm ready."

The firing party advanced quickly and took their places.

"I'll give the orders, colonel," said Ridley. "I've took a notion to be my own executioner, you see."

"Make haste, then."

"Make ready," drawled the captain. "Take aim—oh, pshaw! They don't understand the language—"

Then he spoke French, and gave the orders, and then, hesitating a moment, he cried, in a clear sonorous voice, in French:

"Feu!"

The twenty pieces rung out together and Jack fell, and as he did so the horseman who had been coming up, screaming to them to recover arms, burst into the midst, shaking a paper in the face of Victor St. Jean.

"You dog!" he cried. "Assassin! You saw me coming and murdered him!"

It was the Indian boy, Otumba, and sparks seemed to fly from his eyes.

"You shall suffer for this, Colonel St. Jean," he cried. "I had a reprieve for him here, and you have killed him before my eyes."

"Not much," drawled Jack, rising slowly from the earth. "I just laid down to rest, you see."

A bitter oath burst from the lips of the colonel, and a cry of joy from those of the Indian boy.

"I see the little 'un coming, colonel, and as I calculated you didn't want to shoot me unless the general was willing, I just dodged the bullets. A man ain't got to move so awful quick to dodge a French bullet, anyhow."

"Boy!" hissed St. Jean, "what do you want here?"

"To deliver this order from General Mejia," replied the Indian boy, with sparkling eyes.

St. Jean took the paper, opened it, and read this order:

"Circumstances which work for the good of the empire require that the prisoner should be set free at once. Furnish him with a good horse."

"MEJIA."

"Now in the name of all the heathen gods," hissed St. Jean, "what is the matter with him? I lost fifty of my men in taking this man, and now, when I have him under my very muzzles, he steps in with an order to set him free. By Heaven, I will not do it."

"Perhaps you know General Mejia better than the rest of us," responded Otumba, in his flute-like voice. "I have heard it said that a man would do as well to sign his own death-warrant as to oppose his will. Do you see anything wrong about the order?"

"No, that is in good form, but it drives me mad. I do not know what to do, and yet there is only one course. Captain, by the terms of this order I am obliged to set you free."

"Which the same you don't want to do, I reckon," said Ridley, laughing.

"No; had it not been for your cunning trick, you would be far beyond the reach of Mejia's order long before this."

"I don't know," replied Jack, with a meditative glance at the firing party. "Somehow it seems to me them boys couldn't hit the side of a barn."

"Come, come," said Otumba, impatiently. "Give Mejia a horse, colonel; or shall I ride in and inform him that you refuse to obey the order? You know that he is supreme in Matamoras since Bazaine went to Mexico, leaving Ragolet in command of the French."

"No, Indian; I am not quite such a fool as all that. Private Dard, dismount, and give your horse to the prisoner. It shall be replaced at barracks."

The man led his horse forward, and Jack sprung into the saddle. Otumba did not hesitate for an instant, but dashed across the coun-

try at full speed, heading direct for the chaparral. Victor St. Jean looked after them for a moment in doubt, and then, placing himself at the head of his men, he rode back to the city. At the barracks he dismissed his men, and went to headquarters to report.

"You have returned, Victor," said the general. "No doubt you were surprised at my order."

"You are right, general; the fellow tricked me, or he would be dead now. But he prevailed on me to let him give the orders to the firing-party, and then dropped at the shot. Your order came, and the rascal got up, laughing."

"He is a gallant fellow, and full of expedients," responded Mejia. "I would give much if I could make him mine."

"You cannot do that. He is one of those stubborn men, who, having made up their minds, never turn or change."

"Well, well, his reprieve is doubtless short. You took care to chain him well when he was returned to his cell?"

Victor looked at the speaker in utter bewilderment.

"Chain him! What do you mean? Did not your own order set free the man we hated so much?"

Mejia bounded from his chair as if galvanized. His black eyes sparkled with a fierce light, and he brought his hand heavily down upon the table.

"By Heaven, St. Jean, you will drive me mad! Set him free! Not for a king's ransom would I do that."

"Look you, general," said St. Jean; "I do not know what you mean by the language you employ. The order you sent me was in terms which could not be mistaken, and was brought by your Indian boy, Otumba."

"Yes, directing you to return the prisoner to his cell for the time being, as for a private reason I could not have him executed to-day."

"And he brought me this," declared St. Jean, laying the order down upon the table, "and threatened me with your deep displeasure if I did not obey it, as I was at first disinclined to do."

Mejia caught up the order, and the moment his eyes rested upon it he uttered a roar like that of a mad lion, and St. Jean drew back in alarm.

"Sound boot and saddle and away after them, St. Jean. By Heaven, the young hound has deceived us all. I gave him two orders, one to release the brigand Choluda, and the other for you. Scour the country, run them down, and hang that young traitor to the first tree."

And the two darted out of the castle together, mounted, and rode to the barracks, and in half an hour were on the march, with five hundred horsemen, Mejia and Victor St. Jean at the head.

The Indian chief was sternly bent upon driving the men of Gideon's Band to the wall and recapturing Jack Ridley. They broke into the chaparral boldly, for their force was so great that they had no fear of anything the forces of Del Reno and Conejos combined could do against them.

Signal-whistles in front warned them that the march was not unobserved. Now and then a horseman could be seen far in advance, who galloped away the moment the advance of the Frenchmen appeared.*

Mejia would allow no pursuit. The men they had seen were the guerrillas of Conejos and knew the chaparral too well to make pursuit at all pleasant. Their numbers continued to increase, and dropping shots began to annoy the Frenchmen, but they kept their ranks.

At last they reached the edge of the chaparral and saw a number of men running across a little valley which was hemmed in on all sides by overhanging rocks. Mejia took in the situation at a glance and prepared for battle.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BATTLE IN THE CHAPARRAL—WHO WAS OTUMBA?

"FORWARD!" cried the stern voice of the Indian general. "The knaves are on the run."

"En avant, mon comrades," rung out the mellow voice of Victor St. Jean. "We have them in the toils."

The hussars were the first to pour across the little valley, which had been the camp of Conejos. It was now deserted; everything which could be of any use to the men of the chaparral had disappeared with them. The rocks rose high on every hand, but a little depression on the western side showed where they had passed out.

As the hussars sprung up the rocks toward the

narrow pass, with their carabines ready, the impetuous young colonel set his foot upon a rolling stone and fell heavily, wrenching his right leg so severely that he could not walk.

"Charge!" he cried. "Never mind me. On, for the glory of the lilies on the white flag!"

The hussars sprung into the pass with the *élan* which only Frenchmen, eager for conquest, ever know. The path went upward straight as an arrow for a distance of a hundred yards, and at no place was more than five yards wide. At the top was a sort of natural rampart, and as the hussars huddled into the pass, Jack Ridley suddenly sprung into view.

"Gentlemen," he cried, "we are going to pile in."

A dozen carabines were aimed at him, but he sent a rifle-ball into the crowded ranks of the French, and sprung back. In an instant the rocks bristled with weapons, and a perfect hail-storm of bullets rushed down among the cavalrymen, and the pass was soon strewn with dead and dying. Still the daring hussars struggled to make the ascent. But, in the face of that withering fire, which they were unable to return, the effort was simply madness, and they began to cry out to their comrades in the rear to retreat.

"It's murder in the first degree," said Ridley, leaning on his rifle. "Oh, git, you critters! Don't throw away your lives!"

"Pour it into them!" roared Conejos. "No mercy for the accursed invaders!"

Still the hussars pushed their way upward, and almost at the muzzles of the *escopetes* and carabines, received the murderous volleys. But, as they approached, their front literally melted away before that deadly fire, and the blood ran down the inclined plane toward the valley camp.

The slaughter was horrible, and even Mejia could see how utterly useless was such a struggle. The long-drawn notes of a bugle could be heard sounding the retreat, and the hussars tumbled over one another in their frantic efforts to escape.

The Mexicans would have leaped down after them, but Conejos and Jack Ridley pushed them back. Take it easy, boys, take it easy; don't be too resky. You've licked 'em, and that ought to be enough for you."

The hussars passed out of the valley of death, leaving half their number dead, wounded or dying upon the rocks. They were mad with rage, and the wild, resounding yells of the guerrillas did not add to their feelings of happiness. But what could they do? The pass seemed to be the only one for miles by means of which they could hope to cross the ridge, and to go through was simply impossible.

"Manuel Garcia!" cried Mejia. "Send him here, colonel; I want him."

The half-breed came forward, with a crimson line along his forehead where a bullet had scarred it. The blood running down his face and mingling with the grease and dirt gave him a horrible appearance.

"Is there any way to take them in the rear, Manuel?" demanded Mejia.

"Three miles above there is a pass like this, but perhaps they have guarded it; I don't know. Once on the top you can pass along the ridge and come up behind them."

"Major Conway!" cried Mejia.

A young Irish officer, who had already gained a name for bravery, advanced and saluted.

"Take two hundred of the hussars and follow Garcia," was the order.

"Mounted?"

"Yes; leave the horses at the pass under a guard of ten men and come up in the rear. At the sound of your bugles we will take them in the front."

Half the hussars filed away under Major Conway and disappeared, while the remainder, with the lancers, remained in the valley. But they were quickly driven out of this, for the guerrillas, passing along the crest of the ridge, opened a fire upon them which sent them flying back to the shelter of the chaparral.

Two hours passed, and nothing was heard save an occasional dropping shot from the ridge to show that the guerrillas were upon the alert and waiting for the charge. All at once the ringing notes of the bugle were heard upon the ridge, and instantly the hussars bounded across the opening over the slaughtered bodies of their comrades and over the ramparts behind which the guerrillas had been lying, when, to their surprise, there was no foe to face. The men of Conejos had taken advantage of the opportunity and were off, where, they could not tell.

"Curses on them!" cried Mejia, "they have tricked us again."

Scarcely had he spoken when a wild shout broke out from the higher ridge above them, and which, like the rest, was nearly inaccessible, and great stones came leaping down the slope, tearing their way through the crowded ranks of the Frenchmen and crushing them down by scores. Mejia had a thorough knowledge of this guerrilla warfare, and had taken part in it, and a single glance was enough to convince him that the whole army of Maximilian would not be enough to dislodge Conejos from the retreat where he now stood. With scarcely the loss of a man they had succeeded in inflicting terrible loss upon the Imperialists, and they would have been less than men if they had stood there to be crushed to atoms under the flying boulders. There was nothing for it but retreat, and securing the wounded they again fled, followed by the jeers, shots and shouts of the guerrillas.

Mejia fled with the rest, gnashing his teeth, for he saw that the last chance of avenging himself upon Jack Ridley was gone, at least for the present. The entire party at once mounted and drew off rapidly, and the scouts who ran out on their trail returned within an hour and announced that they were making all speed out of the chaparral, taking their wounded with them, but leaving their dead.

The last of the scouts who came back announced that Gideon's Band were in the chaparral, hanging upon the flanks of the enemy, and worrying them at every step. Jack Ridley at once sent out an orderly who overtook the Band, and called them to a halt until they were joined by him near the Hidden City.

The meeting between Jack and his men was one of wild delight, and for a time it seemed as if they would tear him limb from limb in their eager joy.

"Oh, let up, boys, let up!" cried Jack. "There, there, Dan; I'm mighty glad to see you, and I reckon you are glad to see me. Let's be off; Mejia won't draw bridle until he gets to Matamoras, and he'll remember the 'Big Chaparral' till the day of his death."

"Is this young red going with us?" said Dan, looking at Otumba with some disfavor.

"You bet," was the laconic response.

"I kain't say I love the reds, as a gin'ral rule," protested Dan.

"I tell you I'd be a dead citizen if it wasn't for the boy. He saved me, and I'll stand by him until all is blue."

"If these gentlemen object to my going with them, Otumba can take care of himself," said the boy, proudly.

"Now, don't git up on your ear that way, boy," said Dan. "Did I know that you helped the captain out of trouble? Give us yer paw; put it thar."

He put out his brawny hand and inclosed that of the boy in a fervent clasp. Then Gideon's Band, with loosened reins, gave their horses the spur, and rode away through the chaparral to reach the Jalapa road. Once on the main thoroughfare, they headed to the north, and wherever they went they were greeted by the acclamations of the people, who knew how nobly these dark-robed men had fought in the cause of Mexico. Just at nightfall they came swinging up to Del Reno's old home, where a number of camp-fires were already lighted, and at a glance they recognized the brilliant uniforms of Ramon del Reno's men.

"Thar's the curinel, Jack," cried Dan. "Oh, won't he be mighty glad to see ye."

Del Reno hurried out, and his eyes were full of joy as he saw Jack Ridley riding at the head of his men.

"I am more than delighted to see you, captain," he said. "Mejia has made the country warm for you since you crossed the Rio."

"I've had some fun, colonel," replied Jack. "But I say! Has your daughter come in yet?"

The colonel started. He knew nothing of the movements of Marietta since she had left the men of Gideon's Band to effect the release of her lover.

"Did you not see her in the city? She went away to help you if she could, and I have not heard from her. Great heaven! What if she has fallen into the hands of Mejia again?"

"Durn the luck," growled Jack, as he tightened his saddle-girth. "Seems to me I've got to be always fooling 'round Matamoras. Well, good-by, boys, see you again some day."

"Where are you going?" demanded Otumba.

"Back to Matamoras. I don't advertise to let a girl like that get into trouble for my sake, and never lift a fin. It ain't my way."

"You will be killed if you return," cried the Indian. "You must not; you shall not."

"Shall not is big words in a little mouth,"

responded Jack. "Take care of the boy, colonel, and I—"

Otumba put his hands to the heavy sombrero which he wore and removed it. At a touch of his hand the long, straight black hair fell off, and revealed the curling locks of a woman. The next moment Marietta Del Reno was in her father's arms, sobbing for joy!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST STRUGGLE—HAPPY TEXAN HOMES.

RAMON DEL RENO had with him four hundred men of his regiment and decided to camp for the night near the ruins of the hacienda. He was full of hope, for he led the advance guard of Escobedo's army, now on the march to drive Mejia from Matamoras, and open the campaign which made Mexico free.

Jack Ridley was so overjoyed at finding his preserver in Marietta that he did not use his general precaution when in camp, leaving the matter to his superior officer. He should have remembered that the vengeance of Mejia never slept, and as morning began to dawn they realized that the foe were all about them. They had crept out without drum or bugle, and three thousand cavalry surrounded the doomed band.

Their only cover was a patch of timber, and there was no time to build a barricade. But, covered by the trees, they sternly waited for the last.

It came quickly. Mejia was eager for their death, and ordered the advance. Six field-pieces swept the timber as the troops came on at a run. The lancers, who led the attack on foot, were buried back, completely riddled. The rifles of Gideon's Band did deadly work, for their only hope was to die bravely. The lancers, with their short carbines, could not do much service yet, but they knew their work was cut out for them when the hussars advanced on foot with St. Jean at the head.

Marietta stood bravely by her father's side as the terrible fire raked the motte.

She was looking at her lover and thought that he was glorious. Bareheaded, his long hair tossing in the breeze, he stood in the midst of the fiery tempest, a smile upon his lips, directing the fire of his men. He knew that there was no escape, and yet there was no sign of fear in his face.

"Oh, if Escobedo would come," groaned Ramon del Reno. "Marietta, you love that man—I know it—and by all the saints he shall marry you if we live."

"There goes Billy Pill-box and Rowdy Pat," cried Texas Dan, as the two dropped. "I'm awful sorry for them two boys."

"'Tis hard, Dan," replied Jack Ridley. "Here they come, lads; make it red-hot for them."

They responded bravely. The head of the column reeled back, shaken and sundered by the leaden shower poured into them by the deadly breech-loaders. The ground over which the Frenchmen passed was thickly strewn with their dead, but they did not stop or turn."

"Down with the rifles," cried Jack Ridley. "Revolvers, boys; pour it into them!"

Up sprung Gideon's Band, each with two revolvers, and standing in the very edge of the cover, did deadly work. Down went the hussars before the withering fire, while those who charged up the motte were hurled back from the long lances of Del Reno's men. At last, utterly discomfited, they broke away from the front and fled, while a third column, which had followed close in the rear, charged down upon the devoted Band.

Still their stunning cheers rang out, and with almost superhuman valor they bore back the rush of the foe. Twice, in spite of their numbers, did they force the enemy to break and fly before them, but while they defended the front of the motte so gallantly a host of Mejia's men had taken possession of both flanks, and were working their way through the underbrush to get at the gallant defenders of the patch of timber.

All hope was gone when from both flanks an overwhelming force rushed upon them.

"Form square!" cried Ridley. "Ring around us, lancers."

The order was instantly obeyed, and with Gideon's Band in the center, the men of Del Reno presented their lances to the foe.

"Surrender, brave men," cried Major Conway. "In the name of Maximilian, I promise you safety."

"Never," cried Jack, dropping his dialect.

"We will die where we stand."

"Let them die, then," shouted the hoarse voice of Mejia, from the edge of the cover.

Ridley sent a bullet in the direction in which he heard the voice, and killed a man who stood close to the side of the general, and the Indian chief interposed a tree between himself and the plucky Yankee.

"Where's St. Jean?" shouted Jack. "I want to see him. Come up here, if you dare. I'd die easy if I could get in one blow at you. It only grinds me," he added, turning to Marietta, "to think that you will be in his clutches again."

"I shall not be taken," she answered, showing the tiny revolver clasped in her right hand. "When there is no longer hope, I can die."

He looked at her proudly.

"You are game," he said. "Ha! there's one I want."

The revolver came down quickly and exploded, and Manuel Garcia, shot through the brain, leaped in the air and fell in his tracks. Texas Dan aimed at a major of the lancers and brought him down. Then came the charge, when, to the utter surprise of all, a sudden fire was opened upon the lancers on both flanks, the volleys coming as from a regiment, and the assailants melted like snow, got to their horses, and were off. Jack Ridley caught up a rifle and took a snap shot at St. Jean as he sprung to the saddle, and saw him fall forward on his horse's neck. Then came a charging cheer, and they saw a heavy column dash out of the motte upon both flanks, firing at the fugitives as they ran. It was the army of General Escobedo, and Gideon's Band were saved for other work.

We might follow the adventurous Band through many scenes of peril, for they had work to do before the end. But with the defeat of Mejia before the prairie motte, the power of Maximilian began to wane slowly but surely. Bazaine, Ragolet and nearly all the foreign legions turned their backs on Mexico, and went to their own land and left Maximilian to his fate.

Victor St. Jean, badly wounded by the last shot of Jack Ridley, turned back with Mejia when he left Matamoras, and remained with him when the legion left Mexico. He was one of the few who had faith in the ability of Maximilian to uphold the monarchy; but the end came at last, when Escobedo, with a gallant force, ringed the noble emperor, Mejia, and the last of their army, within the walls of Queretaro.

Gideon's Band were there, with brave Jack Ridley at their head. There, too, were the noble Del Reno and his men, Marietta, the guerrilla Conejos and his band. The story of that siege is now a part of history, and the noble emperor, taken at last, with but the semblance of a trial, was hurried to execution. Del Reno, Rivera, and many a noble man besides, pleaded for the life of the archduke; Jack Ridley stormed and threatened in vain; even Marietta could not prevail, and Maximilian, Mejia and another general were led out and shot to death by Escobedo's orders. Maximilian died with the name of Carlotta on his lips—Mejia died, and made no sign!

"I knew it," said Jack Ridley, as the sound of the guns ceased. "Mejia died as I knew he would—like a grim old Indian warrior. Mexico will never prosper until her men learn to show mercy to a fallen foe. I'm sick of it all, Del Reno, Texas is good enough for me."

With the fall of Queretaro the war was at an end. Gideon's Band, loaded with honors, some money and many promises, turned back to their own land. Del Reno refused the honors which he might have received from Juarez and went back to his estates to build up his ruined home, taking Marietta with him. The Band escorted them on the way.

On the road to Matamoras a man came out of the bushes, ragged, bleeding and footsore. At a glance they recognized, in this haggard figure their deadly enemy, Victor St. Jean.

"I surrender to you, Captain Ridley," he said. "You can do as you like with me."

"We've got a spare horse," responded Jack, quietly. "I'm going into Texas; will you go with me?"

"I expected to be killed," said St. Jean, bitterly. "I deserve no better at your hands and those of the Del Renos."

"I've had my fill of fighting," was the reply. "You just come with us, and you'll see that Gideon's Band ain't forgot how to use a man when he drops his sword."

Three days later the Band bid the Del Renos good-by, and taking St. Jean with them crossed the Rio and landed upon the soil of the "Lone Star State." Here they scattered and went their varied ways. Jack, Texas Dan, Billy Pill-

box and Rowdy Pat, with Victor St. Jean, kept together, and a few days later, clubbing their money, of which all had a share, they took up a stock ranch not fifty miles from the Rio.

Fortune favored them and they grew rich. A year after, Jack Ridley called the party together and they again invaded Mexico. Even St. Jean was safe to do this, for Juarez gave him his safeguard. They found the hacienda rebuilt, and here, upon the spot where such valiant deeds were done, Marietta gave her hand where she had given her heart, and Victor St. Jean, after the father and groom, was the first to salute the bride.

"We have been enemies, *ma belle Marietta*," he said, "but I swear that, now I know him, there is not a man for whom I would give my life so quickly as for your noble husband. We are friends till death!"

Years have passed since these momentous months. Jack Ridley and his wife still live upon their now noted Texan ranch, and Del Reno, sickened by the anarchy and confusion that so long reigned in his own land, joined them, and is now a peaceful and happy rancher, and Billy Pillbox, now Doctor Forsythe, has a ranch not far from those of his friends. Victor St. Jean married to a beautiful girl in San Antonio, is also upon a ranch of his own not far away. Rowdy Pat, ruined by rash speculation, is head stockman to his old commander, and happier than when he was a "cattle-puncher." Texas Dan is doing well, and from time to time members of Gideon's Band drift to the different ranches, but they are soon off for other scenes. But their deeds are not forgotten, and for many years the Mexicans of the north will talk of the days when "Gideon's Band" fought so well for Mexico, in the days of the Austrian's usurpation.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,

92 William Street, New York.